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COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY STUDIES IN ENGLISH
AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

# CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

Christina Rossetti

from a sketch made by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1865

# CHRISTINA GEORGINA ROSSETTI

BY

ELEANOR WALTER THOMAS

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TO

MY BROTHERS

# PREFACE

Three years after the death of Christina Rossetti, Mr. MacKenzie Bell published (1898) a biographical and critical study, *Christina Rossetti.* The poet's brother, William M. Rossetti, did not at that time judge it fitting to tell the story of his sister's relations with James Collinson and Charles B. Cayley, the two men who at different periods of her life had won her love. William Rossetti later wrote a memoir of Christina as an introduction to the 1904 edition of her *Poetical Works,* and in 1908 her *Family Letters.* The memoir and the many other volumes of Rossetti material either written or edited by William Rossetti have added to the facts in Mr. Bell's book. It seemed, therefore, that the present time, the centenary of Christina Rossetti's birth, was appropriate for a new study of her life and for a more extended criticism of her work than had previously been produced. The niece of Miss Rossetti, Signora Olivia Rossetti Agresti, wrote me that the family had no unpublished material about her aunt. Though I had access to some unpublished letters, my biographical problem was, then, mainly one of interpreting facts collected from books already printed: not only those cited, but also the letters, diaries, and biographies primarily concerned with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and other contemporaries of the poet rather than with Christina Rossetti herself. As critic, I have endeavored to call attention in particular to the relation of Christina Rossetti's work to the literature of her time, to study her prose books for the light which they throw upon her poetry, and to indicate the association of some of her poems with the experiences of her life.

I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Ashley Horace Thorndike, who suggested this study and made helpful and stimulating comments during its progress. For the critical read-

ing of the manuscript, I am indebted also to Professor Charles Sears Baldwin, Professor Ernest Hunter Wright, and Professor Emery E. Neff. I acknowledge with pleasure the assistance given me by Signora Olivia Rossetti Agresti of Rome; Professor Ferrando of Florence; Judge Willis Vickery of Cleveland, who permitted me to use his rare Rossetti publications; and James F. Drake Inc., who furnished me with copies of several letters of Christina Rossetti.

I am indebted to the following for permission to quote from their publications: the Macmillan Company for quotations from Christina Rossetti's *Poetical Works* and *New Poems* and from Lady Burne-Jones's *Memorial of Edward Burne-Jones;* Charles Scribner's Sons for passages from *Rossetti Papers* and *The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti;* George Bell and Sons Ltd., and Mr. H. C. Marillier for a passage from the latter's *Dante Gabriel Rossetti;* Sands and Company for extracts from *Rossetti Papers* and *Gabriele Rossetti;* and the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge for extracts from Christina Rossetti's devotional prose works. I am indebted also to Mr. Arthur Rossetti for his permission to quote from the works of the Rossetti family.

E. W. T.

December, 1930.

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# Chapter I

## VICTORIAN ROMANTICISM AND CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

The life of Christina Rossetti very nearly synchronizes the reign of Queen Victoria. She was born seven years before Victoria was crowned, and died seven years before the Queen. Of the many facets of the literature of a reign which saw greater changes than any other in the story of England, the work of Christina Rossetti reflects clearly only those which we associate with the romantic and the religious: personal confession, transcendentalism, idealism, or the beauty of the external world of flower and fruit and wood and the beauty of the world of illusion and spirit.

At the middle of the century when the young English poet was just entering her twentieth year, the significant traits of the romanticism of the Victorian rather than the Revolutionary era were dominating literature. The temper of reform and the democratic fervor of the youth of Wordsworth and Southey and the manhood of Shelley were less strong in literature in 1850 than was the concern of men with religious questions. This interest was growing in keenness in the face of the scientific discoveries and theories of Lyell and Darwin and of the increasing confidence of men in applied science, in machinery, as bringing present happiness and an understandable, tangible sort of economic salvation. Indifference, blindness, or opposition to the spiritual and the inexplicable in the universe manifested itself in various ways. Within the realm of Christian orthodoxy were the high and dry churchmen, men without mysticism, who regarded the Church as a highly respectable institution supporting reason-

able authority and orderly progress. Outside the pale of the Church were men and women who were earnestly trying to arrive at some sort of working faith from which the supernatural was excluded, and so there was the scientific naturalism of Huxley and George Henry Lewes and such lay creeds as that of George Eliot, who found the meaning of life in the opportunity it gives for self-development and for helping others. The secularist workingman was rejecting Christianity as the religion of the unfair capitalist and the idle land-owner. In the midst of a world growing more and more sceptical, material, and mechanistic, the believer in the transcendental and the supernatural felt, therefore, that it was the duty of all human beings to stand by the soul, to marshal their battalions to assert the supremacy of the spiritual against the attacks of the Gradgrinds and the Barnes Newcomes, the Dodsons and the Plugsons—all those who asserted the indisputable domination of facts and pounds, of factory and Bank of England. To the opponents of materialism and scientific naturalism, soul was the only reality, and hence the story of its activity, its life history, the crucial or the high moments of its growth must be the absorbing interest of literature. Men and women, therefore, sought to tell how they themselves or their heroes and heroines faced religious questions, or struggled towards a working philosophy which kept alive spiritual intuitions.

Such stories of spiritual growth are by nature mainly personal, and the Victorians continued the romantic practice of writing personal confessions and autobiographical poems and novels. It was in the middle of the century, 1850, that Thackeray and Dickens published their autobiographical novels, *Pendennis* and *David Copperfield;* Tennyson, his account in *In Memoriam* of the silencing of his doubts by transcendental faith; Browning, his personal interpretation of certain Christian beliefs in his *Christmas Eve* and *Easter Day;* and Mrs. Browning, the story of her personal love in her sonnets. In the same year, though

written long before, was first printed Wordsworth's *Prelude,* the poetical history of the growth of his individual mind; and those most intimate of personal utterances, the Brontë poems, were reprinted. It was only shortly before that Clough had been writing of himself, whether in holiday humor he composed a vacation pastoral, or in graver mood expressed the scepticism he shared with Arnold. Clough, sceptical as he was, held fast to a belief in an unseen truth in which there is no variableness or turning, and Arnold, to a trust in the validity of the nameless feelings arising from the life buried within each individual consciousness and in the unseen influence of the thousands of just men made perfect. In *Yeast,* Charles Kingsley had told of the religious evolution of an imagined hero, in part himself, and Carlyle in 1851 was to publish a similar story of an actual man, *John Sterling.* It was in that book that he condemned the introspection of contemporary writing: "diseased self-listenings, self-questionings, impotently painful dubitations, all the nosology of spiritual maladies, so rife in our day." But the self-listenings and auditions went on and the interest of the public in them continued. Dr. Pusey's translation of *The Confessions of St. Augustine* was a much read book; George Eliot embodied autobiography in *The Mill on the Floss,* her searching analysis of the emotional and spiritual history of a vividly realized individual woman; Newman narrated his personal religious and theological experiences in the *Apologia;* and the story-tellers of the Oxford movement and the reaction from it were prolific in tales of devout and consecrated little heroes and heroines.

There were other aspects of the war against materialism. Stories of ghosts and elves, mermen and sea fairies took the fancy of many besides Tennyson and Arnold. The Pre-Raphaelites sought subjects for paintings in legend and in Scripture, and stressed the use of material symbols for spiritual or mystic truth. The Oxford Movement had resulted within the Anglican Church in the increased importance attached to the Sacraments as out-

ward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace and in an added reverence for the person of Christ as the means whereby the individual might ascend to the higher reaches of spiritual attainment. The example of Christ might be an incitement to inward holiness, but such holiness must be gained by self-discipline, an austere keeping of thoughts and wishes in order. The belief that the medieval period was an Age of Faith was strong, and men were attracted to the Middle Ages not only by the glamour of Gothic cathedral and romance but also by the ideals of monasticism and ecclesiastical ritual and pomp. Ruskin was praising the nature of the Gothic when in the Oxford of the 1850's William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones planned to found a monastery, and the enthusiastic young Burne-Jones signed himself in letters: "General to the Order of Sir Galahad," or "Edouard Cardinal de Byrmyngham."[1] There was something boyishly credulous, playfully æsthetic in such ideas as these, but other men were more seriously affected, and ascetic or disciplinary orders were founded within the Church of England throughout the land. The desire to make facts approximate the building of one's fancy may find outlet in the poetry or the life of aspiration, and in either case, the result may be the utterance of disappointment or unsatisfied yearning.

Unfortunately romantic art became decadent as the second half-century advanced. The poet divorced the realm of imagination and the realm of fact, and from the life of men "that sow to reap," withdrew into the world of dreams. Though his life was far from idle or ineffective, William Morris, the most virile of the new poets of the period, lamented that he was a dreamer born out of his due time—"the idle singer of an empty day"; and his contemporary, Swinburne, in verses of exquisite beauty praises nothingness:

[1] G. M. Burne-Jones: *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones,* London, 1906, pp. 77, 62.

From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be.
That no life lives for ever;
That dead men rise up never;
That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.

Sir Walter Raleigh condemns the aesthetic school for substituting for public and healthy feelings "the emotions of the recluse, the fugitive, the pilgrim, the mystic, the rebel,"[2] and for pursuing an art inspired by wistfulness, longing, melancholy. This desire to escape from life, to sleep, to die, marks in varying degrees the work of James Thomson, Rossetti, Oscar Wilde, Ernest Dowson, John Davidson.

Christina Rossetti escapes the full force of this censure not only by her steadfast religious faith and the stiffening influence of stoical morals, but also through her wholesome and happy reaction to the outdoor world. She shares in the Victorian faculty of accurate observation of natural phenomena and vivid and imaginative re-creation of them. Tennyson may have astonished the country squire of Cranford by making him first see that ash buds are black in March and that "the cedar spreads his dark-green layers of shade," but the London-bred girl of Italian inheritance could see no less clearly than the greater poet. It may be a twilight calm which she describes when

The very squirrel leaps from bough to bough
But lazily; pauses; and settles now
Where once he stored his food;

or it may be a threatened storm—"the windy heaven lowered black with a fire-cloven edge."

It is convenient to record here another link between Christina Rossetti and her age. Attention has over and over been called

[2] Sir Walter Raleigh: "On the Decline and Fall of Romanticism in 19th-Century Poetry," in *On Writers and Writings,* London, 1926, p. 206.

to the emergence of women in the literature of nineteenth-century England. The roll call of significant names among women writers before the last decade of the eighteenth century is incredibly short as compared with the long list since then. Southey had written to Charlotte Brontë in 1837: "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be."[3] Thirty years later, the defender of the liberty of women, John Stuart Mill, recorded that the majority of men thought that "women who read, much more women who write, are, in the existing constitution of things, a contradiction and a disturbing element."[4] The number of contradictions and the strength of the disturbing element had grown since the day of Southey's letter, and continued to grow during Christina Rossetti's lifetime. It is indicative of her lack of self-consciousness and dignity that she wrote as she pleased with no thought of there being anything at all unconventional in her doing so. There was no concerted movement among women to thrust themselves into print, and apparently no class feeling among them as a group frowned down upon. Christina Rossetti herself had no part in the feminist movement of her day although she counted among her friends more than one ardent feminist.

Shelley, whose lyrics Christina most admired among the poems of her century, said: "Poets, the best of them, are a very chameleonic race; they take the color not only of what they feed on, but of the very leaves under which they pass." It may be dangerous to track dreams too exactly back to the actualities of life, but if poets are indeed taking color from what they absorb and what they touch, we must, to form a judgment of Christina Rossetti—her life, her character, her literary work, take into account this Victorian world in which religion was of tremendous importance and in which a main enterprise of human

[3] *Letters of Robert Southey,* Oxford Press, 1912, p. 509.

[4] J. S. Mill: "The Subjection of Women," in *On Liberty and Other Essays,* New York, 1926, p. 222.

endeavor was the bridging together of the world of fact and the world of transcendent values. Traits or preoccupations that have sometimes been regarded as peculiarly feminine or peculiar to Miss Rossetti may, then, belong to no one sex or person. Christina Rossetti was, however, intensely original and individual in the quality of her genius; she attained perfection in her art by writing out of her own restricted experience as deepened and heightened by her imagination.

## Chapter II

## THE EARLY YEARS—1830-1848

### 1

Christina Rossetti was the daughter of Gabriele Rossetti and his wife, Frances Mary Lavinia Polidori. She was born on December 5, 1830, at 38 Charlotte Street, London, the youngest of four children: Maria Francesca (born February 17, 1827), Gabriel Charles Dante (May 12, 1828), William Michael (September 25, 1829), Christina Georgina. Christina was named for her two godmothers: the Princess Christine Bonaparte, then Lady Dudley Stuart, the daughter of Napoleon's brother Lucien, who had been a friend of Mr. Rossetti's; and Miss Georgina McGregor, in whose home Mrs. Rossetti had been a governess.

The father, Gabriele Rossetti, must have had as colorful and romantic a personality as any of his children. He is revealed in his poetical autobiography and in his letters as zealous and independent, excitable, strongly affectionate and demonstrative. He was a native of Vasto, a seacoast town near Naples. His father was a blacksmith and locksmith; his mother, the daughter of a shoemaker; the two families, however, of creditable position in the town. Gabriele's older brother was a canon admired for his pulpit eloquence, and he, Gabriele, and two younger brothers were all poets.[1] Christina once confessed to a friend that she had felt discouraged over her poetic inheritance: "I feel that we—I, at least—ought to be far worthier after so much pioneering on the part of our relatives. I am afraid that they

[1] W. M. Rossetti: *Gabriele Rossetti, a Versified Autobiography,* London, 1901, p. 6.

would look upon us as mere appendices to the Rossetti Chapter!"[2] The family name was originally Della Guardia, Rossetti being a nickname given to certain Della Guardias because of their red hair. These Della Guardias were entitled to wear a crest, a sturdy looking tree with the motto: *Frangas non flectas.* Dante Gabriel used the crest at times, and the motto is curiously applicable to the character of Gabriele and that of his younger daughter. Gabriele wrote in his verse autobiography of his early ambitions as poet, musician, painter; he purposed to write verses linking music and thought, to shun those which sprawl forth untuned and

> Sometimes require a very surgeon's hand
> To make them upon crutches stand afoot.

He left his home for Naples as the secretary of the Marchese del Vasto, who sent him to the University of Naples for a year.[3] In middle life he could read Latin with ease and was well versed in French; he could repeat from memory *The Divine Comedy* as well as much of Petrarch, Ariosto, and Tasso. He became in Naples the official poet, or librettist, of the San Carlos Theater, then curator of the department of sculpture in the Museum, and was a teacher, a lecturer, a revolutionary and patriotic poet. He was most popularly known for his improvisation of Italian verses. He helped in wresting a constitution from Ferdinand, the King of the Two Sicilies, took part in the activities of the Carbonari, and when political reaction set in, he spent three months in hiding before he escaped to Malta on an English ship in the scarlet regimentals of an English lieutenant. Lady Moore, the wife of the admiral of the British fleet, had interceded for him because of her admiration for his poetry. His friend in

[2] William Sharp: "Some Reminiscences of Christina Rossetti," *Atlantic Monthly,* June, 1895, Vol. 75, p. 741.

[3] The facts relative to Gabriele Rossetti are derived from his autobiography and from the following works of W. M. Rossetti: *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His Family Letters with a Memoir,* London, 1895, and *Some Reminiscences of William Michael Rossetti,* London, 1906, Vol. I.

Malta was the governor, John Hookham Frere—better known as a satirist. In 1824, he reached London and made friends with other Italians there, among them Gaetano Polidori, the former secretary of the poet Alfieri and the father of the young physician, who accompanied Byron to Geneva in 1816. Rossetti gives a romantic account of his meeting and falling in love with Frances, Gaetano Polidori's second daughter.[4] They were married in April, 1826, he being forty-three, and the bride twenty-six.

Like his father-in-law, Rossetti taught Italian as a means of livelihood; in 1831 he was elected Professor of Italian in King's College, London, a position to which little salary was attached. William has recorded that his father's income never exceeded £300 yearly. He was financially assisted by two friends. The first of these, Mr. Frere, having encouraged Rossetti to migrate to England, seemed to feel responsible for his welfare and so would send him £50 or £100 from time to time. The second, Charles Lyell, the father of the geologist, was, like Rossetti, an enthusiastic Dante scholar and spent several hundred pounds in the publication of Rossetti's works bearing on Dante. These were an edition of Dante's *Inferno,* with a "Comento Analitico," *Lo Spirito Antipapale che produsse la Riforma,* and *Il Mistero dell' Amor Platonico del Medio Evo derivato dai Misteri Antichi.* Four volumes of poems, too, appeared at intervals between 1833 and 1852. The four Rossetti children lived, then, in an atmosphere of Dante study, mysticism, and Italian poetry.

Watts-Dunton[5] speaks of Rossetti's conversation as being an odd blending of "the dreamy and the matter-of-fact," and of the circumstance that though none of his children inherited his musical gifts, yet all inherited his musical voice and like him had the habit of clear syllabification. His own autobiography and his son William's reminiscences call attention to what the son describes as "a sort of self-opinion involving self-applause."

[4] W. M. Rossetti: *Gabriele Rossetti,* pp. 85-88.

[5] Theodore Watts-Dunton: *Old Familiar Faces,* London, 1916, p. 182.

In the father's writing this self-esteem impresses the reader as a boyish trait founded more on abounding vitality and optimism than on egotism. When he writes to his wife of financial matters, he is always hopeful that somehow money will flow into their treasury, and he is always intense in inquiring about his children; when she writes he must have news of them one by one. The Pre-Raphaelite critic, F. G. Stephens, met Gabriele Rossetti in 1848 and recorded his impressions of him and his wife.

I could not but be struck by the noble energy of his face and by the high culture his expression attested, while a look of eager, almost passionate, resolution seemed to glow in all he said and did. To a youngster, such as I was then, he seemed much older than his years, and while seated reading at a table with two candles behind him, and, because his sight was failing, with a wide shade over his eyes, he looked a very Rembrandt come to life. The light was reflected from a manuscript placed close to his face, and, in the shadow which covered them, made distinct all the fineness and vigour of his sharply moulded features. It was half lost upon his somewhat shrunken figure wrapped in a student's dressing-gown, and shone fully upon the lean, bony, and delicate hands in which he held the paper. He looked like an old and somewhat imperative prophet, and his voice had a somewhat rigorous ring speaking to his sons and their visitors. Near his side, but beyond the radiant circle of the candles—her erect, comely, and very English form, and face remarkable for its noble and beautiful matronhood, and but half visible in the flickering glow of the fire—sat Mrs. Rossetti, and the mother of Dante Gabriel.[6]

This intensely loved wife and mother, Frances Rossetti, was the quiet influence in the house. Her younger son describes her temperament as the reverse of his father's: she "preferred the dignity of self-retirement rather than that of mixing with and influencing others"; she was the most regular and self-postponing of women. One remark of hers is often quoted:

I always had a passion for intellect, and my wish was that my husband should be distinguished for intellect, and my children too. I

[6] F. G. Stephens: *Dante Gabriel Rossetti,* London, New York, 1894, p. 7.

have had my wish, and I now wish that there was a little less intellect in the family, so as to allow for a little more common sense.[7]

Yet she, too, had a goodly endowment of intellect. She had been a governess before her marriage and taught all four of her children, giving the daughters all the schooling they had. Watts-Dunton, who knew the family intimately after about 1870, wrote:

> I think that there was no beautiful charm of woman that Mrs. Rossetti lacked. She did not seem at all aware that she was a woman of exceptional gifts, yet her intellectual penetration and the curious exactitude of her knowledge were so remarkable that Gabriel accepted her dicta as oracles not to be questioned.[8]

When Watts-Dunton was visiting the Rossettis at Kelmscott, he pronounced *aspirant* with the accent on the middle syllable. Gabriel corrected him: "My mother always says *áspirant,* and she is always right upon matters of pronunciation." Watts-Dunton promptly agreed always to say *áspirant.* Afterwards Christina said to him: "I think you were right about *aspirant.*" Nevertheless, the two determined to accept Mrs. Rossetti's pronunciation.

Mrs. Rossetti's mother was an Englishwoman, Anna Maria Pierce, herself a teacher and the descendant of schoolmasters. Mrs. Polidori's daughters were brought up as members of the Church of England, her sons in their father's church, the Roman. There were three daughters besides Mrs. Rossetti: Charlotte, Eliza Harriet, and Margaret, and three sons: John, Byron's physician who committed suicide when in his early twenties; Robert; and Henry, who anglicized his surname to Polydore. The Polidori women were deeply though not pretentiously religious or pietistic. The only recorded instance of narrowness on Mrs. Rossetti's part relates to her husband's work, *Il Mistero dell' Amor Platonico.* She feared that it was subversive of religion and after Rossetti's death burned all the copies in her pos-

[7] *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, His Family Letters,* Vol. I, p. 22.
[8] Theodore Watts-Dunton: *Old Familiar Faces,* p. 184.

session.[9] Rossetti, a Roman Catholic by birth, had become an opponent of orthodoxy and sacerdotalism, yet he remained a believer in the power of the personality and teaching of Christ. He never in any way interfered with his wife's religious education of their children.

Mrs. Rossetti was deeply loved by all her children. When the shadows fell about her older son in the closing years of his life, he left his house only to visit her; when she left William's home after his marriage, he recorded his disappointment that his wife and his mother were not exceptions to the rule that a woman and her mother-in-law should have separate establishments.[10] To Christina, her mother was throughout their life together companion, friend, heart's delight. In the dedicatory sonnet written when her mother was eighty, the poet addressed her thus:

> To my first Love, my Mother, on whose knee
> I learnt love lore that is not troublesome:
> Whose service is my special dignity,
> And she my lode star while I go and come.

## 2

Much in the character of the Rossetti children may be understood as derived from heredity; on the other hand, their early physical surroundings do not seem to have been what would foster poets and artists. The first home, 38 Charlotte Street (now Hallam Street), stands on what was one of the least frequented streets in the Portland Place vicinity south of Regent's Park. William Rossetti[11] says (1906) of the neighborhood:

> It is dingy and in my time was most unrespectable. . . . Every now and then the decorous section of the inhabitants would make an effort to clear out offenders, and the offenders remained or resumed.

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[9] W. M. Rossetti: *Some Reminiscences,* Vol. I, p. 117.
[10] *Ibid.,* Vol. II.
[11] *Ibid.,* pp. 3-4.

The colored prints in a barber's shop-windows were especially hostile to the cause of decency. The house, furthermore, was too small, and when Christina was five years old, the family moved to another house in the same vicinity, 50 Charlotte Street. There was no garden attached and opposite was a public house—a quiet one, however, not unrespectable like the street. It was in the front parlor, or dining room, of this home that the six members of the family spent the evenings. At first no pictures hung on the walls; then one by one appeared a varied collection, the gifts of friends or kinsfolk: two small oil paintings, one of Vasto, the other of the Blue Grotto at Capri; an engraving of Queen Victoria in her opera box, from Grandaunt Harriet Pierce; a sixteenth-century oil painting of *The Marriage-Feast of Tobias,* and a fine picture of the painter Wright of Derby by himself. In another room of the house hung a squirrel cage.[12]

The earliest picture of Christina is given in a letter of Gabriele Rossetti to his wife, May 15, 1832, Mrs. Rossetti then being with the children in Hastings. The father is longing to see their "skittish Christina" with her rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes, so like her grandmother's, and he imagines that now she has learned to walk alone and is like a little butterfly among the flowers.[13] Two years later, she was to her brother William "pretty little Christina—and very pretty some people considered her then." Her eyes were hazel; her hair bright, soon, however, settling down into brown, her face oval: she had "a winning air of half-thoughtful *espiéglerie*"; and she was affectionate and spirited.[14] Her father wrote his wife of how during that much-loved person's absence at the coast, they were all counting the days before her return, but

the most steady computer of this sum is Christina. This morning, barely just out of bed, she came in great glee into the room

[12] *Ibid.,* Ch. I.

[13] W. M. Rossetti: *Gabriele Rossetti,* p. 120.

[14] W. M. Rossetti, *Some Reminiscences,* p. 20.

where I was studying, and the first words she spoke were these—"Not counting today, only three days remain."[15]

Perhaps the merry child had assumed a degree of her later demureness by her fifth year when the seven-year-old Gabriel wrote to his aunt, Margaret Polidori:

Papa has bought two shawls for Maria and Christina. Dr. Curci, a great friend of Papa's came from Naples, and has given Christina a little locket without hair, of the Virgin Mary with Jesus Christ in her arms; it has a rim of mother-of-pearl.[16]

Gabriel wrote a few weeks later of the family's going to a fancy fair for the benefit of a charity school where he bought a box of paints, Maria an album, and Christina two fishes and a hook. It was about this time that the father wrote in Italian a little poem to the two girls:

Christina and Maria,
My dear daughters,
Are fresh violets
Opened at dawn.
They are roses nurtured
By the earliest breezes;
They are lovely turtle-doves
In the nest of Love.[17]

More suggestive of temperament are later anecdotes of the brother and sister. According to her own recollection, Christina's first real excitement was a visit with Gabriel to the Zoölogical Gardens. The two children walked hand in hand across the solitudes of Regent's Park during a magnificent sunset, which, Gabriel declared, he could see setting fire to the distant trees and roof-ridges. They imagined what must be the thoughts of the caged animals. Christina decided that they would be honored by plaintive verses, but Gabriel set her laughing with his

[15] W. M. Rossetti: *Gabriele Rossetti,* p. 129.

[16] W. M. Rossetti: *Pre-Raphaelite Diaries and Letters,* London, 1900, pp. 6-7.

[17] Mackenzie Bell: *Christina Rossetti: a Biographical and Critical Study,* London, Boston, 1898, pp. 7-8.

whimsical biographies of the captives. On another occasion Christina told Gabriel of how she had dreamed that at dawn she saw rising from Regent's Park a multitude, a wave of canaries. He promised to paint the scene, the visionary in yellow with primroses under foot. The children made many visits to the Zoo, and perhaps Christina was too eager to make friends with the queer animals there, for she was bitten by a collared peccary.

Their father, too, took them on rather rare walks; once in a while they wandered about in the rural village of Hampstead, and now and then they climbed Primrose Hill. Mostly, however, they were happily occupied in that front room on their dingy street. In the evening, the children sometimes played cards with their mother; sometimes a game of their own manufacture with Maria clubs, Gabriel hearts, William spades, and Christina diamonds. The father worked in the room, but on occasion would play chess with the young people, or perhaps when he came home in the London winter evenings, he would stand before the fire and sing to them in his sweet, generous tones. The eldest of the children was hardly ten, the youngest six, when they raced and tumbled over the floor repeating "in semi-drama" the Battle of Clan-Alpine from *The Lady of the Lake.*[18] In their quieter moods Mrs. Rossetti told them stories, or they read.

To their father they always spoke Italian, and Italian, too, to most of their visitors; for in their early childhood, there were no English friends, but Italians of all sorts: "there were odd characters, queer characters, shady characters, picturesque characters, high-minded and exalted characters, and some quite commonplace ones as well."[19] A boy and a girl thrown with such elders were not destined to be poets of the species whose verses were then filling the pages of the Christmas annuals.

[18] W. M. Rossetti: *Dante Gabriel Rossetti—Memoir,* p. 60

[19] W. M. Rossetti: *Some Reminiscences,* p. 13.

Of the four children, Maria was the most precocious; Dante Gabriel was dominant and angrily passionate, though quickly placated; William Michael his father describes as the "well attempered," he himself, as a staid good little boy, the champion of Christina in disagreements with the older brother and sister. Even this ally of hers recalled, however, that the younger sister as a four-year-old was "the most 'fractious' of the quartette: hardly less passionate than Gabriel, and more given to tantrums."[20] Already, though, her health was uncertain, and in spite of temper, she was lively and affectionate. She herself told Mr. Sharp[21] that in those early years, William was invariably simple, direct, and as quietly cordial as he was in maturity:

> *I* was the ill-tempered one of the family; and my dear sister used to say that *she* had the good sense, William the good temper, Gabriel the good heart, and I the bad temper of our much-loved father and mother.

Gabriel, though, judged Christina the daughter of what was noblest in their father and beautiful in their mother. He thought Maria a born leader; Christina a born apostle, of whom no one was ever afraid. Maria was pitiful of her younger sister, who was delicate "and rather demure," and Christina simply worshipped her. Even in those girlhood years the lively, passionate, independent little girl must have assumed too early a cloak of demureness under the stress of exercising self-control in order to root out the bad temper which the adored and dominating Maria censured. It is a serious and sensitive little face which looks out from the watercolor of the seven-year-old Christina painted by her father's friend, Filippo Pistrucci.[22]

Mrs. Rossetti taught her children the catechism and the Bible, and was the sole teacher of the two daughters except for masters in German, music, and art. Sir Edmund Gosse says that

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[21] William Sharp, *op. cit.*, p. 738.

[22] Reproduced by Mackenzie Bell: *Christina Rossetti,* p. 7.

from the lips of Miss Christina herself he had it that all through her early girlhood she lay as a passive weight on the hands of those who invited her to explore the bosky groves called arithmetic, grammar, and the use of the globes. She told him, too: "As to acquirements, I lagged out of all proportion behind them [the clever sister and the clever brother]." The family criterion, however, was exacting; Maria could read any ordinary book in Italian or English before she was five, and William reproached himself because his mother had to turn him over to the tuition of his aunt Margaret, who was "not wanting in régime," so that he might read fluently by the time he was six. Gabriel was writing blank verse dialogue at five, and when he was seven, he wrote Aunt Margaret: "I have been reading Shakespeare's *Richard the Third* for my amusement, and like it exceedingly. I, Maria, and William, know several scenes by heart. I have bought a picture of Richard and Richmond fighting, and gilded it, after which I cut it out with no white." Christina may have read less than the older children and have been a little lazy as to acquirement, but her grandfather Polidori predicted "she will have more wit than any of the others," and her brother has recorded instances of her childish feeling for words.

It may have been when Christina was between seven and eight that she composed the beginning of a tale of a dervise, and being a somewhat lazy little girl, probably dictated it, rather than wrote it herself. It was in "the thick of the plot" that it suddenly occurred to her that she had given her hero no name, "so she interjected a sentence, 'The Dervise's name was Hassam,' and continued his perilous performances."[23] This lack of prevision and disjointedness of style shocked the literary sense of her young elders. This tale and a second, *Retribution,* composed before 1840, were oriental, one of the young author's favorite books at that time being *The Arabian Nights.*

[23] *The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti with Memoir and Notes* by W. M. Rossetti, London, 1924, p. L.

During Christina's earliest years, she paid frequent visits to her grandparents, the Polidoris. They had a country home, Holmer Green, near Little Missenden in Buckinghamshire. The Rossetti children, who seldom rode in the city, must have delighted in the stage-coach ride of thirty miles as well as in the outdoor amusements of the country. Christina took the trip oftener than the others. She once said that if anything schooled her to be a poet, it was the delightful, ideal liberty of prowling all alone in her grandfather's garden. In her reading diary, *Time Flies,* are a few reminiscences of these visits: of the frogs which the boys would catch and release and about which she would later rhyme; of the one wild strawberry which the girls watched ripen only for a bird to forestall them in eating it; of the dead mouse which Christina buried comfortably under moss and which gave to her mind its first vivid experience of the ghastliness of physical death; and of the stars and birds, of which she acknowledged ignorance but loved to sing. "Any small outdoor bird with forked tail and black and white plumage may pass me as a swallow or a martin. When mud nests are not in sight, then it becomes a swallow."[24] There is a suggestion of the mystic's all-inclusive love of living things in Christina's not being repelled by the animals which most of us get rid of quite summarily. In her womanhood she surprised little Grace Gilchrist by taking up and holding cold frogs and clammy toads or many-legged caterpillars; and in her verses she writes with sympathy of such unattractive creatures. The garden mouse is "a poor little timid furry man," and the mole and the earthworm figure in an allegorical rhyme. In London, the child was so removed from outdoor scenes that the sight of primroses in a railroad cutting awakened her delight.[25]

Early in 1839, the Polidoris moved to London, 15 Park Village East, Regent's Park, and Mrs. Rossetti used to visit them

[24] *Time Flies, a Reading Diary,* New York, 1902, p. 202.

[25] Edmund Gosse: *Critical Kit-Kats,* New York, 1903, p. 140.

every day, no doubt usually accompanied by Christina. Mr. Polidori's books attracted the young Rossettis more than their father's, which so largely belonged to the realm of Dante scholarship. At their grandfather's were romances and tales of terror: the Waverley Novels, Ariosto with French engravings of the eighteenth century, the Newgate Calendar, *Legends of Terror*, Hone's *Everyday Book,* in which they found *Marco Bozzaris*, *John Gilpin's Ride,* and extracts from *The Eve of St. Agnes* along with other poems stirring their romantic feeling.

The reading of the four future writers, however, was varied enough in character, though the tastes of both Gabriel and Christina were predominantly for Gothic romance, for stories haunted by suggestions of unseen forces of good or evil. There were such didactic tales as Miss Edgeworth's; Day's *Sandford and Merton;* the very moral *Fairchild Family* of Mrs. Sherwood, which they did not like; *Sons of a Genius* of Mrs. Hofland, which they did like; and James Mill's *Stories from English History*. They read ballads, fairy tales, Monk Lewis's *Tales of Wonder*, and by the time Christina was in her teens she had discovered Mrs. Radcliffe and a little later Charles Maturin, whose *Melmoth the Wanderer,* that apotheosis of the tale of terror, was an especial favorite of hers as well as of her poet-brother's.[26]

The earliest letter by Christina extant in the family was written in Italian in June, 1842, when she was eleven and a half and is addressed to her father, whose ill health had taken him from home.[27] In it she refers to Dr. Adolf Heimann and to Mr. Parodi. The latter was the children's dancing master; the former, Dr. Heimann, was professor of German in the London University College and had proposed that he should teach the four children German in return for Italian from the father. The arrangement was carried out and the children read German folk

[26] *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, His Family Letters,* Vol. I, ch. vi, pp. 57-68.

[27] W. M. Rossetti: *The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* New York, 1908, p. 2.

tales and Schiller, acquiring a fair degree of proficiency in the language. In music none of the four made much headway. After Pre-Raphaelitism was born, Christina took drawing lessons.

It was in 1842 that Gabriele Rossetti's income had begun to decrease; instruction in German, not Italian, had become popular, and furthermore, his eyesight and health had begun to fail. The family did not become unhappily poor, though William Michael does tell of how, when a fourteen-year-old, he painted with blue water color the whitened elbows of his one blue jacket when a wealthy friend invited him to spend the day. At fifteen he got a position as clerk in the Inland Revenue Office at Somerset House, and soon was the mainstay of the family. Maria, "our good Maria" she was to her family, was governess in the family of the Reverend Lord and Lady Charles Thynne, brother-in-law of the Marchioness Dowager of Bath, in whose family Miss Charlotte Polidori was employed first as governess and afterwards as companion. Christina in some degree succeeded her sister in this position. Maria was mostly at home after 1848, but employed in teaching, mainly French and Italian. Christina would at times spend a week or a month with some acquaintance for the purpose of talking Italian with the family. Gabriel was studying art, and by 1848 trying to sell pictures.

Before this time, Christina's health had given grave concern. It must have been largely because of this that her older brother could say that by the time she was twelve, she became melancholy. When she was fifteen, she was under the care of a physician, and she made health-seeking visits to the seacoast, Folkestone, Hastings, or Brighton, such as continued throughout her life. Her earliest lyrics, however, bear witness to a spirit of fun and to the usual sentiment of the early teens rather than to any genuine melancholy, though the term might properly be applied to some of the best verses written by the time she was seventeen.

It is of Christina at seventeen that there remains the earliest account by anyone outside of the family, William Bell Scott, the

poet and painter. Gabriel Rossetti had written to him asking his judgment of his own first poems, and Mr. Scott, having come to London at that time, called to see the youthful poet; he has told the story of his visit to Charlotte Street.

My correspondent was not at home, but the elder Gabriel was, and would see me. I entered the small front parlor or dining-room of the house, and found an old gentleman sitting by the fire in a great chair, the table drawn close to his chair, with a thick manuscript book open before him, and the largest snuff-box I ever saw beside it conveniently open. He had a black cap on his head furnished with a great peak or shade for the eyes, so that I saw his face only partially. By the window was a high narrow reading-desk, at which stood writing a slight girl with a serious regular profile, dark against the pallid wintry light without. This most interesting to me of the two inmates turned on my entrance, made the most formal and graceful curtsey, and resumed her writing, and the old gentleman signed to a chair for my sitting down, and explained that his son was now painting in the studio he and a young friend had taken together: this young friend's name was Holman Hunt. . . . The old gentleman's pronunciation of English was very Italian, and though I did not know that both of them—he and his daughter—were probably at that moment writing poetry of some sort and might wish me far enough, I left very soon. The girl was Christina, who had already at seventeen written like her brother, some admirable lyrics, nearly all overshadowed with melancholy. Melancholy I call it, but perhaps the right word would be pious sentiment. At least in her mind piety and sadness went together, and have done so all her life.[28]

3

The greater number of the lyrics to which Mr. Scott refers had been printed during her seventeenth year by Christina's grandfather.

Gaetano Polidori had set up a printing press in a shed back of his house in the long garden which sloped down to the Regent's Canal. In 1841 he had printed a poem of his eldest

[28] William Bell Scott: *Autobiographical Notes of the Life of William Bell Scott*, London, 1892, Vol. I, pp. 247-48.

grandchild, Maria. This was a translation from Italian into English of an ode, "In Morte di Guendolina Talbot, Principessa Borghese," by G. P. Campana Romano. The Italian is printed on one page with the English opposite. The title page bears the prohibition: "Non si vendi." Two years later the same press produced Dante Gabriel Rossetti's first printed poem: *Sir Hugh the Heron,* the poem which the author himself described as an imitation of Scott and as "absurd trash," showing no promise at all. The 1847 triumph of the little press was a paper covered volume of sixty-six pages of text containing more precocious work than the foregoing. The inscription on the title-page is—"Verses by Christina G. Rossetti, dedicated to her Mother," followed by a quotation from Metastasio:

> Perchè temer degg' io? Son le mie voci
> Inesperte, lo, so: ma il primo omaggio
> D'accettarne la Madre
> Perciò non sdegnerà; ch 'anzi assai meglio
> Quanto a lei, grata io sono
> L'umil dirà semplicità del dono.

There follows an introduction by the publisher.

A Few Words to the Reader

The Authoress of these pages was born in 1830, and her first composition, that on her mother's birthday, was written in 1842. These verses have therefore been composed from the age of twelve to sixteen.

As her maternal grandfather, I may be excused for desiring to retain these early spontaneous efforts in a permanent form, and for having silenced the objections urged by her modest diffidence, and persuaded her to allow me to print them for my own gratification, at my own private press; and though I am ready to acknowledge that the well-known partial affection of a grandparent may perhaps lead me to overrate the merit of her youthful strains, I am still confident that the lovers of poetry will not wholly attribute my judgment to partiality.

G. Polidori.

Of the forty-three poems in the little volume, Christina Rossetti herself reprinted in her collected edition only four: *Gone*

*Forever, Summer, Vanity of Vanities,* and *A Portrait*. Only eleven, however, are omitted from the *Poetical Works* of 1904, edited by her brother William. He has there put them (with the exception of the two named last above) under the caption *Juvenilia,* and has printed with them a few other poems also written by the end of 1847. The fact that Christina herself regarded these youthful verses as unworthy of reproduction must, of course, be borne in mind in any criticism of them.

Two copies of the 1847 volume preserved in the Rossetti family are of peculiar interest; one is illustrated by Christina herself, and the other includes pencil designs by Gabriel for four of the poems besides a profile likeness of his sister. This latter volume was especially bound by Gaetano Polidori and presented to the author, who years later gave it to her brother William on his sixty-first birthday. Christina's designs[29] in the other copy were added perhaps in 1850 and are little colored illustrations rather indifferently executed, but significant in subject. There is the sentiment characteristic of the engravings in the annuals of the 1830's and '40's in the two sprigs of heartsease accompanying the lines *To My Mother on the Anniversary of Her Birth;* in the blue and white forget-me-not for *The Burial Anthem,* and especially in the white grave cross with the two palm shrubs interlacing above it for *Resurrection Eve.* Some of the designs are symbolic. The device for *The End of Time,* a poem on the transitoriness of life, is a rose crossing a scythe; within the angle of the scythe, an hour glass. The symbol accompanying some verses on false love is that of a rosebush intertwined by a snake. Two other illustrations are more humorous. That for the amusing rhyme on the death of a cat is a picture of a sandy and white cat "in a rather sentimental attitude of languor," extending its right arm over a tabby kitten; and that for the occasional verses "To Elizabeth Read, with some Postage-stamps for

[29] Described by W. M. Rossetti: *Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* pp. 464-67.

a collection" is a stamp in a sort of medieval livery of red and black bowing in the character of a humble servant.

The dedication and the opening verses are anticipatory of many dedications and many poems to Mrs. Rossetti in Christina's volumes of after years. The quatrains to her mother on the latter's birthday were probably the first verses which Christina wrote. On the flyleaf of the manuscript notebook containing these and other early rhymes, Mrs. Rossetti has written:

> These verses are truly and literally by my little daughter, who scrupulously rejected all assistance in her rhyming efforts, under the impression that in that case they would not be her own.

Some occasional poems of a humorous turn are among those added by William to the original *Verses*. One of these is a rhymed letter to the author's grandfather with an amusing forced rhyme in its final stanza:

> With love to all the beautiful
> And those who cannot slaughter,
> I sign myself—Your dutiful
> Affectionate grand-daughter.

Many of the poems in the small volume indicate what the young poet had been reading or absorbing. There is a sonnet on Tasso and Leonora; two poems on Sappho; one, *The Dead City,* using a hint from *The Arabian Nights;* one purporting to give the dying wishes of Crabbe's Sir Eustace Grey, and at least four suggested by characters or incidents in the novels of Charles Maturin—two, *Isidora* and *Immalee,* from *Melmoth the Wanderer; Zara* and *Eva,* from *Women,* besides two other unpublished poems entitled *Zara.* One series of verses is prefixed by a stanza from the ballad of *Fair Margaret,* but is itself in six-line stanzas of a Byronic-L. E. L. strain, concluding

> I cannot break so lightly
> The chain that bound me tightly,
> *ONCE* bound my soul to thee.

There are echoes of both the popular favorites, Letitia Landon and Mrs. Hemans, and of Herbert, Blake, Shelley, Keats, Ten-

nyson. There is, too, the gradually increasing influence of the thoughts and phraseology of the Bible: the Psalmist's mood when he is bowed down in heaviness of soul, the burden of Job and of David that life passeth away like a shadow, the strong cry of the great prophet of Ecclesiastes that all is vanity, the imagery of life as a race to be run, a battle to be well fought—these recur with the Christian hope that a rest remaineth for the people of God.

Christina Rossetti's note on the manuscript of the poem *Charity* is the following: "The foregoing verses are imitated from that beautiful little poem *Virtue* by George Herbert." *Charity* was composed before the author was fourteen; it is one of the best of the early poems in melody, restraint, and design. Its perception of the transitoriness of beauty links it with Herrick as well as with the saintly Herbert:

> I praised the myrtle and the rose,
> At sunrise in their beauty lying:
> I passed them at the short day's close,
> And both were dying.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti referred to *Mother and Child* as a lyric "that Blake might have written." After the manner of a "Song of Innocence," it is a dialogue in the simplest words expressing a child's interest and entire faith in heaven. In *Summer,* that season is personified and hailed in terms reminding one of Blake's exquisite poetical sketches of the seasons; here, the tall trees murmur their welcome to a radiant form, whose fair head is crowned with roses. The poem is, too, interesting as the first of Christina's many praises of the season which the Italian part of her so loved.

So much in Christina Rossetti is akin to Shelley and Keats that it may be incorrect to regard as influence even in the work of her teens what is mainly innate or spontaneous likeness. Yet *The End of Time, The Song of a Star, The Water Spirit's Song* suggest Shelley's quickness of rhythm, love of light, and even

his diction, though not yet has the young lyrist caught his music. From the azure of the sky encircled by planets—

> Amethystine, roseate,
> Golden, silvery, glowing blue,
> Hueless, and of every hue—

the star sings—

> I float in the strength of my loveliness,
> And I move round the sun with a measured motion
> In the blue expanse of the skyey ocean;
> And I hear the song of the angel throng
> In a river of ecstacy flow along.

The Water Spirit has watched scenes of the sky and ocean which Shelley's Cloud had helped to create, or has perhaps tried to follow Arethusa in her rush through the caverns under the earth. *Wishes* and *Immalee* bring to us the dreamy sound of sheep bells, the rustling of leaves, and the fragrance of new hay and thyme; they tell of green baskets of flowers or of ripe fruits; and so, in spite of her own acute sensitiveness to odor, to taste, and to sound, they indicate Christina's appreciation of Keats.

Stronger and more unmistakable are the sentiments and manner of Tennyson, whose influence was growing dominant in the 1840's. *The Lotus Eaters,* written in 1847, is a lyrical message from Ulysses to Penelope, bearing news of the sleepy land where all things are resting everywhere. Not only is there a Zara, an Isidora, and an Eva with their suggestions of story, but like Tennyson's are the two portraits of women, *Lady Isabella* and *Eleanor.* Years later Christina wrote also a *Mariana. Eleanor* might very well have hung on the walls of Tennyson's 1830-32 gallery: "lady-slim her little waist rounded prettily" and her long and golden hair

> clustered unconfined
> Over a forehead high and white
> That spoke a noble mind.

*Repining* was not printed in *Verses* but in the *Germ.* It had, however, been composed by 1847, and except for *The Dead City,*

is the only long poem of the early period. It has *The Lady of Shalott* or *Mariana* opening:

> She sat alway through the long day
> Spinning the weary thread away;
> And ever said in undertone,
> "Come, that I be no more alone."

But, then, *The Lady of Shalott* was soon to be the object of Pre-Raphaelite enthusiasm, and there are many likenesses between the mature Christina Rossetti and Tennyson. One noticeable difference between Tennyson's early poems and hers is her infrequent use of compounds. Her feeling for rightness in the choice of words was a gift of nature increased by her Italian training.

The themes of the fifteen-to-seventeen-year-old poet were largely the popular themes of her day. The fact that she wrote often and sadly of love and death is not necessarily indicative of her cast of mind and feeling, for such subjects were not only in the air but also in the annuals, gift books, and individual volumes of poetry written by men as well as women. The Honorable Mrs. Caroline Norton, the editor of *The Keepsake* of 1833, wrote of the broken heart, of passing love. In *The Keepsake* of 1846 of the Countess of Blessington, are *A Lover's Piety*, *The Early Dead*, *From this Dark Prison of My Pain*. L. E. L., the most popular poetess of the two preceding decades, filled her own volumes as well as *The Drawing Room, Scrap Book*, *Heath's Book of Beauty,* or *Friendship's Offering,* with slightly varied tales of a heroine whose blighted feelings, destroyed hopes, and broken heart lead to a slow decline and an early grave. Mrs. Hemans, the recipient of Wordsworth's admiration, might sometimes sound an heroic note and attain a degree of lyrical beauty, yet her "Lady of Provence" can opportunely die on his bier after her husband has been slain in battle, and her poem of the loss of Henry I's "White Ship" differs from Gabriel Rossetti's poem on the same subject in emphasizing not the story of the

lost prince but the fact that the royal father "never smiled again." No wonder, then, that in Christina's verses are many lyrics of deserted love or of love spurned yet faithful unto death; many take us to a deathbed either to hear the dying words of the loyal or the rejected lover, or to ponder on the too early dead; or they lead us to the churchyard to reflect on dissolution and resurrection. Among these is *The Ruined Cross,* verses in a variation of the ballad meter, which Dante Gabriel illustrated but which neither Christina nor William would reprint. They tell how a dying maiden was able with a remarkably light and fearless step to journey miles and miles until she reached a ruined cross. How Miss Rossetti must have smiled in later years over the climax!

> And there she knelt and there she prayed
> Until her heart was satisfied:
> The ancient cross is standing yet,
> The youthful wanderer died.

Two companion poems written late in 1847 and so not in *Verses* are *Heart's Chill Between* on the theme of inconstancy, and *Death's Chill Between,* a woman's lament for her dead love. The first appeared in the *Athenaeum,* October 14, 1848, the first of Christina's poems to be printed for the public. The second was published a week later.

Of some interest from the point of view of church conditions are two poems of 1846. Newman had been received into the Roman Catholic communion in October, 1845; other Anglicans had followed him, and within the English Church, controversy was heated. Mrs. Rossetti and her daughters were then members of Christ Church, Albany Street, and were strongly sympathetic with High Anglican tendencies, but just as strongly opposed to Romanism, and such "Romish" practices as Mariolatry and the invocation of the saints. In the triple rhyme poem, *The Time of Waiting,* Christina speaks in general of the times as turbulent and the Holy Church as rent, but in a better poem not reprinted from

the *Verses,* she writes against the belief in the mediatorial function of the saints. The part of the poem first written appears in the *Poetical Works* as *Mary Magdalene,* but the following month, March, 1846, she added stanzas and called the whole *Divine and Human Pleading.* The poem represents a dying man as longing that he might appeal to the blessed Mary Magdalene since once she had herself been a sinner. She then comes to him and tells him that he must directly approach the Lord of Life even as she had done, and without intercessor ask and receive forgiveness. There is much of Miss Rossetti's characteristic manner, not only in the reprinted stanzas, but also in these from the 1847 volume describing the penitent's vision of Mary:

A woman stood beside his bed:
Her breath was fragrance all;
Round her the light was very bright,
The air was musical.

Her footsteps shone upon the stars,
Her robe was spotless white;
Her breast was radiant with the Cross,
Her head with living light.

Her eyes beamed with a sacred fire,
And on her shoulders fair,
From underneath her golden crown,
Clustered her golden hair.

Yet on her bosom her white hands
Were folded quietly:
Yet was her glorious head bowed low
In deep humility.

Long time she looked upon the ground;
Then raising her bright eyes,
Her voice came forth as sweet and soft
As music when it dies.[30]

[30] *Verses,* 1847.

This early poem is, I think, interesting, too, because of its contrast and likeness to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting and accompanying sonnet of Mary Magdalene. Christina writes of Mary as a spirit from Paradise, or of Mary as already casting off the world in deep repentance and lowlihead as she wipes her Master's feet with her hair; Gabriel pictures Mary on the edge of a reveling group answering her lover's plea for a "delicate day of love," with the words that she must go to her Bridegroom, as "for His feet my kiss, my hair, my tears He craves today."

Many traits of style and subject in these early poems give to some of them intrinsic value and are also significant as manifesting Christina Rossetti's later manner and matter. There are two poems on the subject of the martyr, poems which recall Gabriel's telling William Sharp of how when they were still very young, Maria and Christina expressed to him envy of their martyred sisters of olden days and of how he shocked them by assuring them that they were both far nicer and sweeter as they were, being inflicted, too, with more than their share of martyrdom in having such a vagabond brother to look after.[31] A poem called *The Novice* is based on the idea that the nun-to-be is seeking security from the uneasiness, the poignancy of love. *A Portrait* and *Vanity of Vanities* ("Ah woe is me for pleasure that is vain") are fine sonnets. The second is a strongly felt and imaginative expression of the eternal regret of mankind for pleasure that brings only sorrow at the last, for foregone glory resulting in no gain, for life that causes ancient men to lie down and strong men to rise up only in weariness. On the other hand, the day after her seventeenth birthday, Christina wrote a third sonnet, "The whole head is sick and the whole heart faint," which reproves what Stevenson has called the green-sickness of being seventeen years old. In the volume, there are, too, Christina's characteristic dream poetry in *The Dead City* and *The*

[31] William Sharp, *op. cit.*, p. 738.

*Dream,* her use of symbolism in *The Solitary Rose* and other poems, and allegory in *Repining.* A few pieces are devotional.

The simplicity of diction which marks all her poetry, metrical variety, and a tendency to use dialogue in lyric poems are all found in the *Juvenilia. The Time of Waiting* is written in the triplets later popular with the Pre-Raphaelites; perhaps here imitative of the Hymnal version of the *Dies Irae.* A few of the poems may be called circular lyrics: *The Dead Bride,* for example, opens with the picture of the girl in her bridal robes lying still and pale in the midst of joy—death had found her; and after the onlooker has wondered about her past and her present, he returns with confession of ignorance of all else except that there the pale form lies in bridal robes, for death had found her.

The most promising of the poems written by the end of Christina's seventeenth year is *The Dead City.* The poet does not assume that she is dreaming, but nevertheless she wanders into a wood in a dream world, and there she sees many bright and beautiful things before she enters into a fair white city where all that delights the senses exists in abundance, but where the guests that should be enjoying the banquet are sleeping "statue-cold." Then all vanishes, and once more the visionary is in the real world; but awed by the hidden mystery, she straightway kneels and prays—the last a characteristic touch of Miss Rossetti's. The clear pictures and the riotous delight in color and taste are early manifestations of characteristics which united with others to form Christina Rossetti's curious poetic originality.

## Chapter III

## RELIGION AND ART
### 1848-1851

### 1

The poems which Christina Rossetti wrote in the month of her seventeenth birthday and in the two following years bear testimony to her having reached intellectual, emotional, and artistic maturity. In these years she was stirred by experiences of no small power: the stress of the Catholic revival, the stimulation of her Pre-Raphaelite associations, and the deepening force of love.

Mr. Scott has given a description of Christina at the beginning of the period. There are no less than nine portraits done in pencil or oil by her brother between 1846 and 1850, besides the pictures in which she served as his model, and an oil portrait by James Collinson. They picture a lovely face in varying moods. The expression of sweetness is animated in some by amusement, a suggestion of hidden joy; in others, strengthened by gravity or by earnest intentness; always the impression on the observer is that of sensitiveness of feeling and of character. Perhaps in the original there was much that marks the temperament of the great medieval saints of Italy: the quick response to the beauty of the world, especially to the little creations and creatures of God, the sense that even this beauty is evil if it draws us from the contemplation of the divine, and the consequent need of battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. St. Catherine in her little hillside cell at Siena repulsed the temptations of the Evil One with hardly greater vigor and prostrated herself in no

greater agony of humility than did this composed English girl of Italian race. When she was twenty, she wrote of her debate with the three enemies of the spirit, and not long after, in one of the strongest of all her poems—the sonnet, "By day she woos me soft, exceeding fair"— she saw the world by day, a temptress, wooing her with fair words and rich gifts; by night, a beast whose clutching hands would push her into hell. Just such a fiend has assailed many a solitary worn by midnight vigils. Christina, however, usually had less fearful visions.

Christina knew well not only the Bible but also *The Confessions* of St. Augustine and the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas á Kempis. The struggles and ideals of the fourth-century bishop and the medieval saint were echoed in her life and character. St. Augustine deprived himself of the enjoyment of stage plays, and being enjoined continency from the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the vainglory of the world, tells us in the terms of poetry of his gradual freeing himself of the allurement of sweet odors, of the mere sensuous delight in melody, of the love of fair and varied forms and bright and soft colors. It was as a love of applause for his own excellence that the world tempted him—the snare which Christina feared. Probably the *Imitation of Christ* has given incentive and consolation to more restless spirits than any other book. George Eliot was to write of it as a determining influence in the spiritual evolution of Maggie Tulliver, and Matthew Arnold's *Notebooks* are filled with the phrases of Thomas urging purposefulness and fortitude. In the *Imitation* Christina read of the devil as the old serpent, of fleshly desires as evil beasts; she was admonished to keep purpose with courage, to learn to be obedient, and as being earth and clay, to humble herself. In at least three poems she turns into prayer the exhortation: "Seek always the lowest place, and to be beneath everyone."

It happened that this girl with her strong religious strain was brought closely into contact with the great religious revival of

mid-nineteenth-century England.[1] Her family, at least the women of it, had attended Trinity Church, Marylebone Road, then St. Katherine's, Regent's Park, and after 1843, Christ Church, Albany Street, in the Parish of St. Pancras. Mrs. Rossetti and her sisters had been strongly evangelical—more interested in good works than in dogma or ritual, but after the Oxford Movement had extended to London, they became strongly Anglo-Catholic. The ministers of more than one church in the vicinity were prominent in the controversies of 1840-70. The vicar of Christ Church from 1837-51 was the Reverend William Dodsworth, of Trinity College, Cambridge. He is named by Newman in the *Apologia* as one of the chief preachers of the revival, and Dean Church places him beside Mr. Keble and Dr. Pusey. In 1844 a sisterhood was established in his parish not very far from the Polidori residence. Mr. Dodsworth went over to Rome after the Gorham case of 1850. Near the Rossetti home was the Margaret Street Chapel, later All Saints Church, first among London churches to be noted for its High Church ceremonial. Its rector, the Reverend Frederick Oakeley, followed Newman's example at Littlemore, and, only a few weeks later than he, was received into the Roman Church. He wrote the Life of St. Augustine for Newman's series of saints' lives. In All Saints Parish, the Reverend W. Upton Richards, vicar, the All Saints Sisterhood was founded in 1851 by Harriet Brownlow Byron, the sisterhood which Maria Francesca Rossetti entered in 1876 and with which Christina had associations. Mr. W. J. E. Bennett was the rector of St. Barnabas, Pimlico, which was noteworthy in 1847-50 for its "Catholic" appearance and service: on its altar were candlesticks and jeweled altar pieces and above the chancel screen a cross.

[1] The authorities for this and later paragraphs concerning the Oxford Movement: E. G. K. Browne: *Annals of the Tractarian Movement,* 1842-60, London, 1861; R. W. Church: *The Oxford Movement,* London, 1909; Sheila Kaye-Smith: *Anglo-Catholicism,* London, 1925; S. L. Ollard: *A Short History of the Oxford Movement,* Chicago, 1915.

The church was the scene of the disgraceful ritualistic riots of 1850, Dr. Bennett with difficulty quieting the mob. He went in January, 1852, to Frome-Selwood, Somerset, and in 1871 was the leading figure in a Eucharistic controversy. He remained a strong Anglican. The relations of the Rossettis with Dr. Bennett must have been close, for William Rossetti gives his presence in Frome-Selwood as a reason for Mrs. Rossetti's experiment in school-keeping there in 1853. Dr. Bennett had been given the living by the Marchioness Dowager of Bath, Miss Charlotte Polidori's employer. Her kinsman, the Reverend Lord Charles Thynne, in whose family Maria and Christina both taught, was one of the Roman converts of 1852. The church of St. Andrews, Wells Street, near Margaret Chapel, was known early for its very beautiful music of the so-called High Church sort; the canticles were chanted to Gregorian tones and the Eucharistic office sung. There, too, took place the innovation of the use of the processional cross. Mr. Bell in his biography of Christina naturally and no doubt rightly identifies this St. Andrews with the "St. Andrews" of her tale *Maude,* which the heroine liked to attend because of the beauty of the music though her conscience hurt her for thus neglecting her own church.

A good many years later one of Christina Rossetti's most congenial friends was Dr. Richard F. Littledale, who was one of the most zealous defenders of the English church among the adherents of the High-Anglican party, his *Plain Reasons for not Joining the Church of Rome* being the most popular of such arguments. He was also on the staff of the influential *Church Times*. He figures frequently in Christina's letters and her prose works. An amusing verse skit of his on her books is printed in the *Family Letters*.

Christina Rossetti was to write poetry which would rank her as a great Anglican poet in the company of George Herbert and John Keble, but aside from the verses previously mentioned, the first product of her pen to show her church sympathies was

*Maude,* a work consisting of prose and verse, written in about 1850, revised twenty years or more later, but not published until 1897. In a letter of July 28, 1850, Christina refers to her possibly seeking publication for it, yet, she continues, "perhaps I shall some day produce something better in the first instance." The interest of the story is autobiographical, for William Rossetti thinks that his sister's main object in delineating *Maude* was to exhibit what she regarded as defects in her own character, and in her attitude towards her social circle and her religious obligations. The plot element is slight. Maude Foster, a delicate girl of fifteen, visits her two cousins, Agnes and Mary Clifton, on the occasion of Mary's birthday, and is later visited by them. Agnes and Maude become warm friends. Mary is married, then Maude dies from the effects of an accident. The little tale is amplified mainly by details relative to Maude's writing of poetry, her disposition, and her religious emotions. Her writing book suggests the author's own copy books, or such little albums as that in which Dickens read Adelaide Procter's verses: it "was neither commonplace book, album, scrap book, nor diary; it was a compound of all these and contained original compositions not intended for the public eye, pet extracts, extraordinary little sketches, and occasional tracts of journal."[2] What seems to have been the most heinous sin of the young heroine was her desire that her verses gain admiration. She is conscience-stricken over the realization that she had proposed a contest in *bouts-rimés* sonnets in order that she might outshine the rest.

Touching these same verses, it was the amazement of everyone what could make her poetry so broken-hearted, as was mostly the case. Some pronounced that she wrote very foolishly about things she could not possibly understand; some wondered if she really had any secret source of uneasiness; while some simply set her down as affected. Perhaps there was a degree of truth in all these opinions.[3]

[2] *Maude: Prose and Verse,* Chicago, 1897, p. 9.

[3] *Ibid.,* pp. 12-13.

Such a bit of analysis is probably autobiographical. Maude, too, is spoken of "as perfectly unembarrassed, a woman of the world." It was at this time that Christina quoted Mary Collinson as ascribing to her "unalterable self-possession" and that she wrote some self-accusatory verses (*Is and Was*) inspired by the criticism that she was somewhat indifferent to others, guilty of hauteur, "doing all from self-respect."[4]

One of the characters in the tale goes without fire in her room, makes clothes for the poor, and saves money to buy them wine and soup. Christina's commonsense, however, reveals itself in a comment: "I daresay that she is very good; but that does not make her pleasing." Another character enters the "Sisterhood of Mercy." The girls themselves are embroidering a cover for the lectern in their church. The devices are rich in symbolism: cross, crown, myrrh, hyssop, palm branches, "the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valley." During the controversy over ceremonial at that time, a bishop refused to consecrate a church until some such cloth was removed from the altar. Maude is especially disturbed and penitent over not feeling good enough to go to the celebration of the Holy Communion.

As befits the character of Maude, the poems inserted in the narrative are mostly sad. They include, however, some of Christina's really exquisite verses: *Song:* "She sat and sang always," *Vanity of Vanities, The Three Nuns.* There are two joyous hymns: the Christmas carol, "Thank God, thank God, we do believe"; and the Advent poem, "Sweet, sweet sound of distant waters, falling."

An interesting prefigurement of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's action on his wife's death is the incident at the end of *Maude* with reference to her cousin's disposition of Maude's poems: "the locked book she never opened, but had it placed on Maude's coffin, with all the records of folly, sin, vanity, and she humbly trusted of true penitence also."

[4] *Poetical Works,* p. 300.

The book is a slight thing, and yet it has another interest besides the autobiography; it belongs to a type of story popular in the early Victorian period. One immediate outcome of the Oxford Movement was not only the religious novel such as Newman's *Loss and Gain* and Shorthouse's *John Inglesant* but also the ethical or religious story for boys and girls in which the atmosphere is churchly, often markedly spiritual. Here belong *The Fairy Bower* (1841) by Harriet Mozley, a sister of Newman's; *From Oxford to Rome* (1847) by F. E. S. Harris; *Ellen Middleton* (1844) by Lady Georgina Fullerton; and the popular *Amy Herbert* (1844) of Elizabeth Missing Sewell. Miss Yonge's *Heir of Redclyffe* is justly more well known, but is somewhat later, as were the boys' books of Canon Farrar, and most famous of all, but not of the High Church camp, *Tom Brown's School Days.* These books are not so didactic in tone as the children's stories of the early part of the century; in Miss Yonge's and Miss Sewell's fictional biographies of families of strong religious bent, the teaching is not so much by precept as by example. Both of these ladies were friends of John Keble and are inclined to choose as chapter mottoes quotations from the *Christian Year. Maude,* though a far shorter book, is suggestive of *Amy Herbert:* in both are a heroine with cousins and the interaction of these upon one another's character. Miss Sewell makes her story enforce the lesson of baptismal regeneration, but Miss Yonge's *Daisy Chain,* like *Maude,* exalts the sacrifice of the Holy Communion. It is characteristic of Christina Rossetti that her little tale should be far more subjective than the works of her women contemporaries.

2

Before Christina had written her tale and most of the poems later printed in it, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had been born and was thriving lustily. At least, the "Brothers" themselves were enthusiastic over their activities, though the world

might be hostile or indifferent. It would probably be difficult to overestimate the stimulation given her genius by Christina's association with this group of young men abounding in ambition and enthusiasm for art. She herself was seventeen when the Brotherhood came into being, and the seven "Brothers" well under twenty-five. John Everett Millais was only eighteen, William Rossetti nineteen, Gabriel and Holman Hunt twenty, and Frederick George Stephens, Thomas Woolner, and James Collinson twenty-one, twenty-two, and twenty-three respectively. Millais, Hunt, and Gabriel Rossetti had been fellow students at the Royal Academy. Rossetti brought into the circle the sculptor, Woolner, and the sober James Collinson, whose picture, "The Charity Boy's Début," had attracted Rossetti's attention in the Academy exhibition of 1847. Stephens was at that time painting, but he and William Rossetti became the art critics of the group. Collinson had apparently fallen in love with Christina at sight, had requested an introduction, and had been so ably seconded by Gabriel, then full of the early loyalty and affectionate spirit of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, that by December they had become engaged.

Christina, of course, knew the other members of the Brotherhood, and through them met persons who were to prove enduring friends. Woolner had written to Coventry Patmore and attracted him to the Brotherhood gatherings in 1849, and through Patmore, the young men made the acquaintance of Ruskin, Tennyson, and Browning. Christina knew Patmore and his wife intimately, Ruskin and Browning slightly; Tennyson she never met. Holman Hunt had studied *Modern Painters,* Volume II, chapter 3, and had accepted its teaching. There was, therefore, a Ruskin influence in the formation of the chief Pre-Raphaelite tenet of truth to nature; for Ruskin in that chapter delivers to young artists the dictum:

> They shall go to Nature in all singleness of heart and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to

penetrate her meaning, and remember her instruction, rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good and rejoicing in the truth.

Then in 1851, in the *Times* of May 13 and 30, came Ruskin's defense of the Pre-Raphaelites and his resulting personal acquaintance with them. Apparently this mentor of Gabriel's became a much warmer friend of Maria Rossetti's than of Christina's.[5] Ford Madox Brown, though never a member of the clique, was a sort of "grandfather of the P.R.B." and a close friend. Other artist friends were Arthur Hughes, who was to illustrate some of Christina's works, and later Edward Burne-Jones and his wife.

Christina was now Dante Gabriel's chief model. During the latter part of 1848 and the early months of 1849, he was painting her as the Virgin in his first exhibited picture, "The Girlhood of Mary Virgin," with Mrs. Rossetti serving as his model for St. Anna. The picture was hung in the Free Exhibition at Hyde Park Corner in the spring of 1849. Marillier gives the following description of it:

The scene shown is a room in the Virgin's home, with an open carved balcony at which her father, St. Joachim, is tending a symbolically fruitful vine. On the right of the picture, shown against an olive-green curtain, are the figures of the Virgin and her mother, St. Anna, seated at an embroidery frame. The latter, clothed in dark green and brown, with a nun-like head-dress of dull red, sits watching with clasped hands the work before her, whilst the young girl, a most untypical Madonna, in simple gray dress with pale green at the wrists, pauses with the needle in her hand, and gazes with a rapt ascetic look at the room before her, where, as if visible to her eyes, a child-angel is tending a tall white lily. Beneath the pot in which the lily grows are six large books in heavy bindings, bearing the names of the six [*sic*] cardinal virtues. These and a white dove perching upon the trellis, are amongst the peaceful symbols of the picture, whilst the tragedy also is foreshadowed in a figure of the cross formed by the young vine-tendrils and in some strips of palm

[5] W. M. Rossetti: *Rossetti Papers, 1862-1870,* New York, 1903, p. 14.

and "seven-thorned briar" laid across the floor. Each of the figures, and the dove, bears a halo, the name being inscribed within it.[6]

The Virgin is a fair portrait, but is given golden hair instead of Christina's dark brown. On the frame was inscribed the second of the two sonnets now printed in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poems under the title, *Mary's Girlhood.* The picture was bought by Miss Charlotte Polidori's patroness, the Marchioness of Bath, who paid £80 for it. His Aunt Charlotte had more than once before helped substantially the impecunious young artist.

Christina was again the model in the better known picture, "Ecce Ancilla Domini," William Rossetti standing for the angel of the Annunciation. There remains some record of the artist's tribulations connected with this painting. He had difficulty in the first place with finding a lily in the winter, and in the second place, with William and with his own execution. He wrote to Ford Madox Brown: "This blessed afternoon the blessed white eyesore will be finished. . . . Had to give up the Angel's head as a bad job (owing to William's malevolent expression), so worked it up out of my own intelligence. I have put a gilt saucer behind his head." The picture was rejected by the Academy and hung unsold in the gallery at Portland Place, until in January, 1853, Mr. McCracken, a Belfast packing agent, bought it. It is now in the Tate Gallery. By the time it was completed, the meaning of the initials "P.R.B." had been indiscreetly revealed by Gabriel, and the young artists ridiculed as unskillful rebels and innovators. To avoid accusations of Puseyism, Gabriel changed the title of the picture to "The Annunciation."

William Rossetti says that originally the Virgin was a good portrait of Christina, but Gabriel's later retouchings reduced its likeness to the model. The face, however, is very like that of some of Gabriel's portraits of his sister. An excellent description of the picture is that in the closing lines of the second sonnet of *Mary's Girlhood:*

[6] H. C. Marillier: *Dante Gabriel Rossetti,* London, 1889, pp. 22-23.

So held she through her girlhood; as it were
An angel-watered lily, that near God
Grows and is quiet. Till, one dawn at home
She woke in her white bed, and had no fear
At all,—yet wept till sunshine, and felt awed;
Because the fulness of the time had come.

Ruskin singled out "The Annunciation" for praise in his defense of Pre-Raphaelitism.

Christina sat for Holman Hunt so that he might catch something of her expression for the Christ in his "Light of the World." Later, after Elizabeth Siddall was Dante Gabriel's most frequently used model, Christina appears as the weeping queen at the extreme left in her brother's picture of Arthur at Avalon, which was one of the illustrations of the Moxon *Tennyson* of 1857. She is, too, the central figure in "Hesterna Rosa," the presentation of two gamblers and a woman, who is hiding her face in momentary shame.

Christina herself took lessons in drawing and in painting both in London and at Frome-Selwood. William Bell Scott found her at Ford Madox Brown's class in Camden Town, drawing woodshavings. She made some designs not only for her early *Verses* but also for *Goblin Market* and for *Sing-Song*. Gabriel and Madox Brown both had a rather favorable opinion of her powers; William thought that she did not persevere in art because she did not wish to be only "pretty tolerable" in any accomplishment. Her own comment on a rather remarkable dream of hers was that though it left her with the impression that it was her duty to paint it, "of course I never became competent."

In the short-lived periodical of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the *Germ,* Christina had a more active part. The family letters show that she took her share of the necessary correspondence attendant on publication, and with reference to her contributions to the little magazine, Mr. Gosse has well said: "The youngest poet of the confraternity, she appears indeed in the *Germ* as most finished."

It is the manner of young enthusiasts in a cause to print some sort of organ for propaganda, hence, the *Germ*. The little magazine in its light brown covers assumed a title suggested by Mr. W. Cave Thomas and strangely unlike what we should expect from Gabriel, the lover of "stunning words." After the appearance of the January and February numbers, the name was changed to *Art and Poetry, Being Thoughts Towards Nature,* and with this caption it was printed in March and May. The second title was more indicative of the creed of the contributors as stated on the back cover and in the sonnet of the editor, William Rossetti, which was placed on the front cover: "The endeavor held in view throughout the writings on Art will be to encourage and enforce an entire adherence to the simplicity of nature"; whoever has a thought must speak it, not "as imaging another's," but in the "very speech the matter brought." Another clause stated that an attempt should also be made to claim for poetry the place to which it was entitled. The aims, then, of the group were veracity, freshness of vision, and defiance of conventionality. We have come to associate with these ideals other traits: fondness for vivid coloring and for particular colors, exactness of definition, and love of minute details, these details being regarded emotionally and symbolically. The etchings, articles, and poems of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood magazines are in the main romantic in such qualities as melancholy, dwelling on death, mystical suggestion, and that attitude to the past which Mr. Mégroz has recently defined as "romantic archaism."[7] The first etching by Holman Hunt is an appropriate illustration for Woolner's *My Beautiful Lady* and *My Lady in Death,* the next by Collinson for his poems on the sorrows of the Child Jesus, and the third and fourth on Shakespearian subjects from *Twelfth Night* or *King Lear.* The most noteworthy contributions in poetry aside from those of the Rossettis are the

[7] R. L. Mégroz: *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Painter Poet of Heaven in Earth,* London, 1929, Ch. XIII.

poems mentioned, a poem by W. B. Scott, and two by Coventry Patmore: *The Seasons* (a set of imagistic verses), and *Stars and Moon,* on his characteristic theme, love in marriage. Gabriel Rossetti contributed five poems, including *The Blessed Damosel,* a series of sonnets for pictures, and his prose tale, *Hand and Soul.* The latter enforces the dogma of the group and the practice of the youngest of them, Christina Rossetti; the artist fails if he works to attain fame or to teach morals; he succeeds if from his own heart, he paints the very vision of his soul.

Christina contributed to the January number without signature, *Dreamland* and *An End;* to the February, *A Pause of Thought, Song:* "Oh roses for the flush of youth," *A Testimony;* to March, *Repining,* and *Sweet Death*—these last under a pseudonym proposed by Gabriel, "Ellen Alleyn." There was nothing of hers in the final May issue. These seven lyrics show that Christina's style was formed. Christina herself never republished *Repining,* agreeing no doubt with what Gabriel said, even though he chose it for insertion—"my sister's old thing . . . not quite up to the mark." Patmore praised especially *The Testimony* as being in the style which should be adopted in hymns to make them good. The poem is a remarkable texture of solemn phrases from the Bible, *Ecclesiastes* in particular, woven together with the direct simplicity characteristic of Christina:

> A king dwelt in Jerusalem;
> He was the wisest man on earth;
> He had all riches from his birth,
> And pleasures till he tired of them,
> Then having tasted all things, he
> Witnessed that all are vanity.

*Dreamland* has the music and cadence which Swinburne sought, and in its spiritualized sensuousness and portrayal of veiled or shadowy images takes place among the most exquisite poems of the region between reality and unreality. The young poet who wrote the *Song* has, it seems to me, reached that perfection which

only great lyric poets attain—the voicing of romantic emotion in verses of classic restraint and finish:

Oh roses for the flush of youth,
And laurel for the perfect prime;
But pluck an ivy branch for me
Grown old before my time.

Oh violets for the grave of youth,
And bay for those dead in their prime,
Give me the withered leaves I chose
Before in the old time.

Not only had Christina written five of these published poems during her nineteenth year, 1849—the year of the greatest vitality of the Brotherhood—but during that period she wrote at least twenty-seven poems, many of them her most beautiful and best loved pieces: for example, the song—"When I am dead, my dearest," and the sonnets—*After Death* ("The curtains were half-drawn"), *Rest* ("O Earth, lie heavily upon her eyes"), and *Remember* ("Remember me when I am gone away"). The year before, her notebooks show only five, or at most eight, poems to her credit, and the following year, eleven. (These figures omit the *bouts-rimés* sonnets as they are of the nature of poetical exercises.) The reason for this heightened poetical activity may be far to seek within the growth of her own mind, but the obvious facts are that she was then thrown constantly with an imaginative, hard working group of young people and was herself engaged to be married to one of them.

The *Germ* was a most decided failure. William Rossetti says: "People would not buy the *Germ,* and would scarcely consent to know of its existence." The seven (or eight) proprietors and the adventurous printers had to pay up its debts.[8] Yet it received a good deal of attention in the reviews, several of the notices being quite favorable. The praise was chiefly of the

[8] The *Germ:* A facsimile reprint with an introduction by W. M. Rossetti, London, 1901, p. 11.

poems, Christina's *Testimony, Sweet Death,* and *Dreamland* being singled out for commendation or quotation in the *Critic* and the *Guardian.*[9] The review in the *Guardian* appeared as late as September, 1850; on September 3, Christina wrote William of her mother's gratification because in the article "the pre-eminence of mind [was] not attributed to Mr. Millais."

Meetings of the Brotherhood practically ceased in 1851, and by the autumn of 1853 Woolner was in Australia, Collinson in a lay monastery, his young substitute Deverell had died, and Millais had struck his colors and become a fellow of the Royal Academy. Christina first wrote the following stanzas:

The P. R. B.

The two Rossettis (brothers they)
And Holman Hunt and John Millais,
With Stephens chivalrous and bland,
And Woolner in a distant land—
In these six men I awestruck see
Embodied the great P.R.B.
D. G. Rossetti offered two
Good pictures to the public view;
Unnumbered ones great John Millais,
And Holman more than I can say.

William Rossetti, calm and solemn,
Cuts up his brethren by the column.[10]

(19 September 1853)

A month or two later she added another on the decadence of the order: as Gabriel put it in a letter to her: "So the whole Round Table is dissolved."

3

The first deserter from the ranks was James Collinson. His story is an important chapter in Christina's life. He was the son of a bookseller in the Nottinghamshire town, Mansfield. He was educated in the Royal Academy School in London and when

[9] *Ibid.,* pp. 11-15.
[10] *Poetical Works,* p. 424.

Gabriel Rossetti met him was painting pictures of a realistic, somewhat humorous type. William Rossetti, who had no reason for later friendliness, obviously grew to dislike him and described him as "in person small and rather dumpy, with a thick neck; his face intelligent maybe but in no wise handsome."[11] In speaking of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as the proprietors of the *Germ*, William remarks: "I question, however, whether Collinson was ever persuaded to assume this responsibility, entailing payment of an eventual deficit."[12] Millais, too, refers to him as a torpid member at best, a butt to the others, who made fun of his sleepy nature and dragged him out of bed at midnight to take walks. He was drawn to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood most likely by his love for Christina and by what seemed to be the religious interests of the young artists—at least in their choice of subjects. He had been brought up in the Church of England, but was one of the early converts to Rome. When he first proposed marriage to Christina she refused him, supposedly on religious grounds, for when he relapsed into Anglicanism, she accepted him, becoming engaged near the end of 1848.

During the following three years, Collinson treated themes mainly religious in poetry and in art. His etching in the February issue of the *Germ* represents the boy Jesus crowned with a wreath of thorny roses sitting on a rock with Nazareth in the background. He is accompanied by worshipping children and a mother and baby. There are symbolic details in the picture and the inscription beneath is *"Ex ore infantium et lactentium perfectisti laudem."* The drawing is stiff, with many perpendicular lines, and the proportions of one figure are as incorrect as those in many a fourteenth-century pre-Raphaelite picture. The accompanying poem, *The Child Jesus,* is described in the subtitle as "a record typical of the five sorrowful mysteries": the Agony in the Garden, the Scourging, the Crowning with Thorns,

[11] W. M. Rossetti: *Some Reminiscences,* Vol. I, p. 65.

[12] The *Germ:* Introduction, p. 11.

Jesus Carrying His Cross, the Crucifixion, each sorrow being prefigured by an imagined incident in Jesus's childhood. The poem is full of real feeling and contains pleasing passages of description; for example:

> A pleasant wind rose from the sea, and blew
> Light flakes of waving silver o'er the fields
> Ready for mowing, and the gold West
> Warmed half the sky; the low sun flickered through
> The hedge-rows, as they passed; while hawthorn trees
> Scattered their snowy leaves and scent around.

Other subjects which Collinson chose during his Pre-Raphaelite experience were *The Emigrant's Letter, The Novitiate,* and most important—*St. Elizabeth of Hungary.* Gabriel speaks of him as "cutting" the Wilkie style of art for the Early Christian. *St. Elizabeth of Hungary* is the scene from Charles Kingsley's *Saint's Tragedy* in which the saint removes her crown in the presence of the crucifix. Christina wrote her first sonnet on Saint Elizabeth in November, 1850 (after she read Kingsley's drama), and later, in June, 1852, wrote a lyric apparently inspired by Collinson's picture. The picture itself was judged a creditable work and found a purchaser after its exhibition in the Portland Gallery.

Collinson meanwhile was not happy in the old fold, and by the spring of 1850, he returned to Roman Catholicism. Christina's letters[13] of the months before this throw light on their relations. When William was visiting the Collinson family in 1848, she is all interest as to what they are like; when she herself is in Mansfield the following summer, she is not wholly happy—she wishes her brother were with her—and after her return home, she writes William that she would have much to talk about on his coming home; her visit was pleasant for some reasons but not exclusively so. She says in the same letter that her correspondence with James's sister has come to an end:

[13] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* pp. 2-13.

She seems to think her brother's affairs so unpromising as to render our continuing to write to each other not pleasant. Does not that sound extraordinary?

With reference to this, William noted that Collinson's pictures were not selling, and that perhaps his sister knew that he was contemplating a return to the Roman Church. At any rate, the engagement was broken before June, 1850. Ford Madox Ford remarks:

I am not certain how many religions he essayed. But certainly there came a point when the poetess, whose religion was the main point of her life cried that it was enough.[14]

Gabriel Rossetti then received the following letter of resignation:

Whit Monday.—Dear Gabriel, I feel that as a sincere Catholic, I can no longer allow myself to be called a P.R.B. in the brotherhood sense of the term, or to be connected in any way with the magazine. Perhaps this determination to withdraw myself from the Brotherhood is altogether a matter of feeling. I am uneasy about it. I love and reverence God's faith, and I love His Holy Saints; and I cannot bear any longer the self-accusation that, to gratify a little vanity, I am helping to dishonour them, and lower their merits, if not absolutely to bring them into ridicule. I cannot blame anyone but myself. Whatever may be my thoughts with regard to their works, I am sure that all the P.R.B.'s have both written and painted conscientiously; it was for me to have judged beforehand whether I could conscientiously, as a Catholic, assist in spreading the artistic opinions of those who are not. I reverence—indeed almost idolize what I have seen of the Pre-Raphael painters; [and this] chiefly because [they fill] my heart and mind with that divine force which could alone animate them to give up their intellect and time and labour as they did, and all for His glory who, they could never forget, was the Eternal, although He had once humbled Himself to the form of man, that man might be clothed with and love His divinity. I have been influenced by no one in this matter; and indeed it is not from any angry or jealous feeling that I wish to be no longer a P.R.B., and I trust that

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[14] Ford Madox Ford: *Ancient Light and Certain New Reflections*, London, 1911.

you will . . . [something torn off], but believe me, affectionately yours, James Collinson. P.S. Please do not attempt to change my mind.[15]

The young painter for the time being gave up his art and entered the Jesuit College at Stonyhurst. William Bell Scott says rather acidly that "they set him to clean boots as an apprenticeship in humility and obedience. They did not want him as a priest; they were already getting tired of that species of convert."[16] Collinson left Stonyhurst in 1854, married, and became a moderately successful painter of small subjects of a domestic and humorous character. He was a Fellow of the Society of British Artists, exhibited pictures until 1870, and died in 1881.[17]

What had happened was obviously the only logical outcome of an engagement between a young man with monastic leanings and a girl naturally subject to the customary feelings of Protestants or Anglicans with regard to marriage with Roman Catholics, and vice versa. But because of it, Christina Rossetti ought hardly to be characterized as "adamant," a term used in more than one essay on her life.

There were later two letters written in August by Christina, who was at Brighton, to William, in which she inquires about Collinson and his pictures, though girlishly enough, she does not wish her mother to be cognizant of her questions. William Rossetti's final word on the subject in his *Memoir* is: "He (Collinson) had none the less struck a staggering blow at Christina Rossetti's peace of mind on the very threshold of womanly life, and a blow from which she did not fully recover."[18]

Even in the face of the brother's judgment, the reader of the poems and letters wonders whether Christina had ever been sure of her attitude toward this lover. Dangerous as it is to trust

[15] *Pre-Raphaelite Diaries and Letters,* pp. 275-76.
[16] William Bell Scott: *Autobiographical Notes,* Vol. I, p. 281.
[17] *James Collinson: The Athenaeum,* No. 2789, p. 497.
[18] *Poetical Works,* p. lii.

imaginative lyrics for biographical facts, some of her poems of 1848-50 give rise to conjectures as to her state of mind and the causes for it, just as her letters suggest that she was not altogether easy with regard to Collinson. *A Pause of Thought,* one of the poems published in the *Germ,* is dated February 14, 1848, several months before her meeting with the man to whom she became engaged. The poem expresses "a hope of youth" for the achievement, the fame, which ever seemed to flee away and yet was ever pursued. In self-reproach, the poet says:

> Thou knowest the chase useless, and again
> Turnest to follow it.

A year later during her engagement, she wrote the second part of *The Three Nuns.* Its motto is a bit of a song which the nuns sing in Italy: "It (my heart) may be sighing for love, but to me it says not so." The poem should, perhaps, be taken as the utterance of a nun, and not of Christina, but again there is the censure for one's pressing forward to no goal, striving to win no prize; only a new life in heaven can give satisfaction. To April, a few weeks after this, belongs the second of *Three Stages* ("The End of the First Part"). A happy dream is "finished with," the pleasure-garden of her soul must be dug up, her freedom changed to control, a hermitage reared where once her palace stood, and there, often haunted by the thought of what she might have been, her spirit shall "keep house alone accomplishing its age." In the same month she wrote *Two Pursuits:* she had followed one voice that had led her where the bluest waters flowed, but would not let her drink. It had left her, uncheered by sight or hand; then another came and now kind steady hands sustained her steps and would aid her even unto death.

Two poems of June are *Looking Forward* and *One Certainty,* both of which are in her mother's handwriting in the manuscript notebooks, and which William thought were written when she was depressed by illness. The one certainty is that all things are vanity, all end "in the long dust of death"; and *Looking*

*Forward* is a melancholy brooding on quick death's coming to one who had hoped and longed, but whose life had been barren of achievement. The poem brings to mind Keats's "sick eagle gazing at the sky." Finally, at some time before May, 1850, Christina wrote Section iii of the *Three Nuns:* "Answer me, my heart, wherefore sighest thou? It answers: I want God, I sigh for Jesus." The lyric voices the century-old cry of the soul which sees the fair beauty and the sweetness of the world but turns away from it to find its one true home only when it obeys the command of the Spirit—"Come."

Are not these poems the utterances of youth struggling to find an aim and to follow it, dissatisfied with what it is doing and with what it possesses, and seeking attainment in God? The emotional disturbance of Christina's twentieth year and the months immediately preceding and following were surely not wholly due to a broken love affair.

## Chapter IV

## SOCIAL LIFE, FRIENDSHIPS, AND LOVE
## 1851-1876

### 1

During the early Pre-Raphaelite phase, the fortunes of the Rossetti family had not improved. William summarizes[1] the state of affairs in 1851 as follows: the father was partially blind, ill, and so without professional employment; Maria was a teacher of Italian and French; Dante Gabriel was still learning his art and painting pictures which did not sell; Mrs. Rossetti was the teacher of a small school, in which Christina assisted her, and which was attended by the children of the small tradespeople of the neighborhood—the butcher, the baker, and the hairdresser; the school was by no means remunerative. William was the mainstay of the family; as clerk in the Inland Revenue Office he received £110 and as art critic of the *Spectator,* £50. The family had moved in the beginning of 1851 to 38 Arlington Street, Mornington Crescent, in Camden Town, still not very far from Regent's Park. It was in this residence that Mrs. Rossetti held her school 1851-52.

Christina escaped at least twice from the unwelcome task of instructing the prospective little candlestick-makers. In July, 1851, she was visiting her Aunt Charlotte at the noble seat of the Marquis of Bath at Longleat, Wiltshire. A letter of hers tells of how Lady Bath made her ride home from church in the carriage while the Dowager Marchioness herself walked in the rain. The following summer she was visiting at Darlaston Hall

[1] W. M. Rossetti: *Gabriele Rossetti,* pp. 1-8.

in Staffordshire, "bringing on one or two of the daughters of Mr. Swynfen Jervis in Italian." Mr. Jervis had been a pupil of Gabriele Rossetti's and was something of a student and verse writer. While Christina was at Darlaston, her brother Gabriel sent a cartoon of her in an attitude of earnest attention either drawing Mr. Jervis, who is apparently declaiming on the subject of Shakespeare, or transcribing his words;[2] he also advised her that her mother sent word that two and six was sufficient to give the maid, "in which I may add I do not coincide."[3]

Then, in the spring of 1853, Mrs. Rossetti with her husband and Christina left London to try the experiment of a school in Frome-Selwood, Somerset. As previously mentioned, she was probably attracted there by the presence of Dr. Bennett, who after the High Church troubles at St. Barnabas, Pimlico, had been presented the living at Frome-Selwood by the Dowager Marchioness of Bath. On the whole the year at Frome was unhappy. The school did not succeed and twice Mrs. Rossetti was called back to London, first by the death of her mother in April, and then in December, by that of her father—Christina's sympathetic friend and admirer, the many-sided, warm-hearted Gaetano Polidori. Gabriel, meanwhile, wrote lively letters of his activities:[4] he was painting a portrait of his Aunt Charlotte for his grandfather's birthday and he was working on his never-to-be completed Pre-Raphaelite masterpiece *Found.* Christina must find in Frome the brick wall of precisely the right make and color for his design; surely her pictorial eye would have some insight into the beauties of brick walls—"the preferability of purplish prevailing tint to yellowish, etc." He inquired, too, after Christina's own progress in drawing. She may have been making little headway in her brother's art, but she was composing poems of great beauty. Death having twice intruded into her

[2] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* p. 21.
[3] *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, His Family Letters,* Vol. II, p. 96.
[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 99-121.

family, she wrote of those who sleep silently in earth, hidden among the flowers, or she sang of Paradise. Most exquisite of all the lyrics of these months is *Sleep at Sea,* but not less interesting is the sonnet inscribed *A Soul,* doubtless a self-revealing piece. For Christina's first love had proven vain, a sympathetic friend had died, a project undertaken hopefully was failing, and the goal of recognized poetic accomplishment was apparently as distant as ever, yet she clung to a firm belief in some final and eternal joy. And so the soul which she imagined is one who needed courage to endure:

> She stands there patient nerved with inner might,
> Indomitable in her feebleness,
> Her face and will athirst against the light.[5]

After his family had spent a year in Frome, William Rossetti, then twenty-four, had been promoted at Somerset House to a salary of £250. He at once proposed that he should take a house in which his parents and sisters should live with him. In April, the family were settled at 45 (now 161) Upper Albany Street in a larger and more comfortable home than any they had previously occupied. It was immediately after the move that Gabriele Rossetti became critically ill and died on April 26, 1854. He was buried in Highgate cemetery in a grave near that of Ford Madox Brown's first wife. The inscription includes the biblical quotations: "He shall return no more nor see his native country. Jer. XXII:10. Now they desire a better country, that is an heavenly. Heb. XI:16"; and an Italian phrase, the last emphatic words of Rossetti—*Ah Dio ajutami Tu.*

Gabriele Rossetti has been honored in Italy in many ways for his services to the cause of liberty. Not only was a medal struck in his honor and a centenary commemoration held in 1883, but also his house in Vasto was purchased as public property; the market place—renamed after him, the Piazza de Gabriele Ros-

[5] *Poetical Works,* p. 311. The lines are also quoted by William M. Rossetti on the title page of his edition of Christina's letters.

setti—contains a statue to his memory; and the theater is called in his honor Teatro Communale Rossetti.[6] Furthermore there is an inscription to him in Santa Croce, the Florentine shrine where Italy praises her famous men.

The year before his death, Rossetti had published a collection of his evangelical hymns: *L'Arpa Evangelica.* One of these Christina later translated, a hymn on the mystical oneness of God and man.[7] She also, in May, 1854, composed a poem expressing grief at the separation from a loved one removed by death: "Ye have forgotten the exhortation." Many years later in *Time Flies* (the reading for February 9), she wrote in praise of the music of the voice in terms recalling her father and his *Arpa:* "The voice which charms one generation is inaccessible to the next—it remains as a tradition, it lingers as a regret": the singing voices accompanying "the harps of God" in heaven are the same "which spoke and sang on earth, the same which age enfeebled and death silenced."

It was in the year of her father's death that Christina wished to go with her aunt Eliza Polidori to the Crimea under Florence Nightingale; her application was refused on account of her youth. In June she wrote some verses *From the Antique.* Such titles usually attempt to conceal the personal. At any rate the opening stanzas are what one might imagine as the pale rebellion of a mid-Victorian girl in whose veins was the inheritance of adventure and revolt.

> It's a weary life, it is, she said—
> Doubly blank in a woman's lot;
> I wish and I wish I were a man:
> Or, better than any being, were not.

(The lines are, too, a good example of the commonplaceness to which Christina's simplicity sometimes led her.) Not much later than June, Christina was rejoicing to feel that her health

[6] Joseph Knight: *Life of Dante Gabriel Rossetti,* London, 1887, p. 13.
[7] *Poetical Works:* "Hymn after Gabriele Rossetti," p. 183.

really did unfit her for "miscellaneous governessing *en permanence,*" and her brother William notes that a Hampstead Heath position was her last attempt of the kind. He had previously recorded her eagerness to do anything her frail health would allow.

No interpretation of her character and her poetry can fail to recognize the tremendous influence on her temperament of the succession of serious illnesses from which she suffered. From girlhood on, she was more than once called on to set her house in order before what threatened to be the inevitable end. When she was twenty-two, her heart was so affected that her physician diagnosed the ailment as angina pectoris. In her thirties, especially during 1864-68, her lungs gave trouble, though her medical attendant, Dr. William Jenner, assured her that she did not have consumption. She was in Hastings for a large part of this period, nursing, she said, her "peccant chest," but also preparing a volume of poems many of which she composed at that time. There are some rather amusing but sincerely concerned letters to William from Barone Kirkup, the old friend of William Blake and the Rossettis, who lived in Italy, in which he advises a "low diet" for Christina, but also "a spot under the hill of Fiesole that seems to cure everybody."[8] William Rossetti speaks of the healthiest years of her womanhood as about 1861 and 1867-70.[9] It was in April, 1871, that she was first affected by Graves' disease.[10] That she minded its effect on her looks is evinced in her speaking of her "fearful brownness" and of her being less ornamental than society might justly demand. She tried varied changes in climate or environment, Hampstead, Cheltenham, Gloucester,

[8] *Rossetti Papers,* pp. 255-56.

[9] *Memoir,* p. li.

[10] Bronchocele exophthalmic: goiter accompanied by protrusion of the eyes and heart trouble. An account of this illness of several years is given in W. M. Rossetti's diary in the Appendix to *Family Letters of Christina Rossetti.*

and Glottenham in Sussex, and had improved by the later summer of 1873 only to have renewed trouble in the early winter.[11] The disease left her with permanent heart trouble and somewhat changed appearance.

These years of ill health affected her poetical work but hardly interrupted it. She was constantly writing and had a few verses printed in magazines: the *Athenaeum, Aikin's Year, Once a Week,* the *Bouquet Culled from Marylebone Gardens.* The latter was a magazine privately printed by some young ladies mostly of the Regent's Park neighborhood.[12] Christina's contributions were under the name "Calta" and consisted of three poems in Italian and eight letters forming a correspondence between two supposed girls, Italian and English. She contributed, too, some articles to Dr. Waller's *Imperial Dictionary.* It was not until she published *Up-Hill* in *Macmillan's Magazine* in February, 1861, that her work attracted attention. In the same magazine, *A Birthday* and *An Apple Gathering* followed in the April and the August issues respectively. Gabriel now urged her to prepare a volume of the poems she had already written. Early in 1862, *Goblin Market and Other Poems* was published and Christina Rossetti was at once acclaimed as a poet of charm and originality. Pre-Raphaelite poetry had seemed to have achieved no progress in the eyes of the public since the experiment of the *Germ* in 1850. Morris' first volume in 1858, Swinburne's in 1860, D. G. Rossetti's in 1861 had been judged failures. "Then at last came Christina Rossetti with her brilliant, fantastic, and profoundly original volume of *Goblin Market* in 1862. Swinburne never failed to recognize the priority of Christina; he used to call her the Jael who led their host to victory."[13]

A pleasant anecdote is told of the publisher's interest in the

[11] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* p. 42.

[12] *Poetical Works,* Note, p. 493.

[13] Edmund Gosse: *Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne,* New York, 1917, pp. 136-37.

poems. While they were being made ready for the press, Mr. Macmillan wrote to Gabriel:

> I took the liberty of reading *Goblin Market* aloud to a number of people belonging to a small working-men's society here (Cambridge). They seemed at first to wonder whether I was making fun of them; by degrees they got as still as death, and when I finished there was a tremendous burst of applause. I wish Miss Rossetti could have heard it.[14]

Mr. Macmillan was sure of the success of the volume if the public proved a wise and discerning public.

Later poems were printed in magazines, chiefly in Macmillan's and in several anthologies, until in 1866 Christina published her second volume, *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems.* The two volumes were issued together in a new edition in 1875, but otherwise her publications until 1881 were in prose with the exception of the nursery rhyme book, *Sing-Song,* first issued in 1872. She continued, too, to do some hack work. She read proof for the Society for the Propagating of Christian Knowledge until the work on small print so affected her eyes that she had to stop by February, 1865. In the following year she translated for John Murray parts of an Italian work on architecture, *The Terra Cotta Edifices of North Italy.* She received £20 for the task.

Her poetry had in general been favorably received. In 1862-63, *Goblin Market* was praised in the *Eclectic Review, Macmillan's Magazine,* the *Athenaeum,* the *Spectator,* and in less important periodicals. The reviews quoted copiously from her poems and commended the writer for true and genuine passion and unborrowed power. Palgrave reported to William Rossetti that Tennyson expressed great pleasure in what he read.[15] Many poems of the second volume of 1866 were praised, but on the whole it did not make quite so favorable an impression as the earlier publication. An amusingly adverse criticism appeared in

[14] *Letters of Alexander Macmillan,* Glasgow, 1908, p. 95.

[15] *Rossetti Papers,* p. 6.

the New York *Catholic World.*[16] The critic, F. A. Rudd, wrote paragraph after paragraph in solemn condemnation of the fantastic *Goblin Market* as immoral: he could find not a syllable in the poem to show that yielding to evil as incarnate in the goblins was at all wrong in itself. What is the moral? he weightily inquires. "Not resist the devil and he will flee from you, but cheat the devil and he won't catch you. Now all these sayings and silences are gravely wrong and false to a writer's true functions." The *Nation,* however, was complimentary and the book sold well in America. A few years later (1872), Emerson said to William Bell Scott: "We scarcely take to the Rossetti poetry; it does not come home to us; it is exotic; but we like Christina's religious pieces."[17] *Sing-Song* was at once popular; Swinburne hailed it enthusiastically.

Meanwhile in these years, the Rossettis had a constantly widening circle of friends. Christina kept up her association with the old Pre-Raphaelites and their intimates. At the home of Mr. and Mrs. Coventry Patmore she met Dr. Richard Garnett, who was many years later to write the essay on her for the *Dictionary of National Biography* and to call down upon his devoted head the wrath of Christina's "near-relation," Ford Madox Ford, because he characterized her poetry as being frequently morbid. Then in the latter part of the 1850's, she met her brother Gabriel's enthustiastic disciples, Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris, and Algernon Charles Swinburne, whom Gabriel then called his "little Northumberland friend." After the saddening experiences of the past few years, she must have gained renewed stimulation from this group of recruits in the cause of romantic art. A reference to the chronology of her poems bears this out with regard both to productivity and to the quality of the poetry. She became the friend of Mrs. William Morris and

[16] F. A. Rudd: *Poems,* Boston, 1866; *Catholic World,* New York, 1867, Vol. IV, pp. 845-46.

[17] William Bell Scott: *Autobiographical Notes,* Vol. II, Note, p. 162.

Lady Burne-Jones as well as of their husbands, and knew Lady Burne-Jones's sisters, one of whom became Mrs. Lockwood Kipling, the mother of Rudyard. She always received the tribute of reverent devotion and admiration from Swinburne. Once more she was a model in her brother's artistic ventures: in Mr. Thomas J. Wise's possession is a Rossetti cartoon for a glass window in which two of the figures are portraits of Christina as the Virgin and Swinburne as one of the apostles, apparently John. Another friend, who was a frequent visitor at Gabriel's Tudor House establishment, was the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, who not only traveled in the upper region of pure mathematics and in the Wonderland of his Alice, but was also a skillful photographer. He took several photographs of the members of the family, including one of Christina and her mother in Gabriel's garden. She knew William Allingham, the Irish poet, and later subeditor of *Fraser's* and friend and correspondent of almost every great Victorian, and by 1870-71, she was making a friend of Edmund Gosse, who writes of having met her during that year perhaps a dozen times and of having corresponded with her for years at not particularly distant intervals.[18] In a later period of her life after she had obtained recognition and fame, she knew in varying degrees of intimacy Theodore Watts-Dunton, William Sharp, Arthur Symons, Hall Caine, Katherine Tynan Hinkson. I shall have occasion later to speak of these associations.

In the earlier period, she was frequently at the Madox Browns'. These are glimpses of her as a privileged visitor; for example, on September 23, 1855, Brown entered in his diary: "Christina Rossetti came here from Tuesday till Saturday. . . . She works at worsted and talks sparingly."[19] On another occasion, he recorded: "Christina Rossetti called; she is reading Carlyle with her mother." She was very fond of the marvelous boy, Oliver

[18] Edmund Gosse: *Critical Kit-Kats,* p. 157.

[19] W. M. Rossetti: *Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism,* New York, London, 1899, p. 46.

Madox Brown, who died in 1874. But Ford Madox Brown delighted not so much in receiving single callers as in filling his house with guests. One friend tells of a monster party given to one hundred and twenty friends and foes. "It went off very well, however, people managing to amuse each other exactly according as they happened to be placed, making the most of the person next to him, like pickpockets at a hanging, till they shoved on to someone else."[20] Lady Burne-Jones tells of some such dinner at Brown's Kentish Town residence presided over by the exuberant host with his thick thatch of graying hair. There were present the painter Legros, Swinburne, Whistler—"looking more like a Frenchman than Legros did; his face working with vitality, his thick black hair curling down to his eye-brows with an angry eyeglass fixed beneath it," yet winning friends because of a rumor of his tenderness to his mother. William Rossetti was there, and Gabriel, "in magnificent mood, a prince among men," and quietly unobtrusive among the voluble crowd, Christina, "gently caustic of tongue."[21] On another occasion, Brown was regretting that the Martineaus, the Rossettis, and the Streets could not come, but Christina, if well enough,[22] would.

Other members of the group also entertained. A party at Gabriel Rossetti's was attended by most of the artist group; but Christina Rossetti and Mrs. Bell Scott were absent because it was Passion Week.[23] Sometimes at these parties host and guests adopted fancy costume. Brown tells of how at a gathering at Tom Seddon's, the host was in "full Arabicals," and "Christina Rossetti put on a Syrian dress." At one of the Fitzroy Square parties, the feminine coterie affected a curious antique style of costumes *á la bergére,* the latest development in literary Ar-

[20] Ford Madox Ford: *Ford Madox Brown, A Record of His Life and Works,* London, 1911, p. 131.

[21] G. M. Burne-Jones: *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones,* Vol. I, p. 293.

[22] Ford Madox Ford: *Life of Ford Madox Brown,* p. 131.

[23] G. M. Burne-Jones: *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones,* Vol. I, p. 293.

cadianism.[24] Not that these original leaders of the aesthetic movement conformed at all in manner or costume to the tone of some of their art creations or to the practices or affectations of their followers, men of slighter calibre. The grandson of Brown, Ford Madox Ford, who has been called the last of the Pre-Raphaelites, calls attention to how little inclination these men had to living on the smell of the lily. There are many stories of both Rossetti and Morris like that of Burne-Jones, who told Red Lion Mary that since Rossetti was coming to breakfast, there must be quarts of hot coffee, pyramids of toast, and multitudinous quantities of milk. Ford M. Ford recalls that when the burly leaders were older men, they resembled a group of old-fashioned ship's captains. They cared little for dress. The women, too, especially of the Polidori family, preferred to dress plainly. One of the most amusing of Max Beerbohm's caricatures of *Rossetti and His Circle* sets before us a room with the furniture draped in cloth of Pre-Raphaelite shades of blue and green, and standing in the midst is Gabriel in his familiar black frock coat, expostulating with Christina, who is in Quaker bonnet and black dress.

What *is* the use, Christina, of having a heart like a singing bird and a water shoot and all the rest of it, if you insist on getting yourself up like a pew-opener?

Christina replies:

Well, Gabriel, I don't know—I'm sure you yourself dress very quietly.[25]

Among the friends on whom Christina paid visits of some length were Mrs. Gilchrist, Mrs. William Bell Scott, and Miss Alice Boyd of Penkill. Mrs. Anne Gilchrist on the death of her husband Alexander Gilchrist in 1861, had moved to Brookbank Cottage in the sunny village of Shottermill, a mile from Hasle-

[24] Thomas Hake and A. C. Rickett: *Letters of Algernon Charles Swinburne,* London, 1918, p. 77.

[25] Max Beerbohm: *Rossetti and His Circle,* London, 1922.

mere, which was once a coaching town on the Portsmouth-London route, and so lies in a country described in *Nicholas Nickleby*. The cottage stands on a hill at the foot of which flows a brook, where George Eliot, a later tenant, wrote most of *Middlemarch*. Mrs. Gilchrist made the acquaintance of the Rossetti brothers through associating them with her in the completion of her husband's *Blake,* and through William she invited Christina to pay her a visit in the early summer of 1863. She wrote a friend how wholly charmed she was with Miss Rossetti, her unaffected simplicity, gentleness, and thoughtfulness making her not at all a formidable guest. By 1863, Christina had won reputation as the author of *Goblin Market,* and to Mrs. Gilchrist's daughter, the dark-eyed slender lady appeared a fairy princess come from the sunny south to play with her; to the child she seemed Italian with her deep hazel eyes and olive complexion and her rich, bell-like Italian voice.[26] Mrs. Gilchrist[27] and Christina corresponded, exchanged gifts, and shared in admiration for Walt Whitman. Christina in one letter thanks Mrs. Gilchrist for having allowed her to batten on her Plato before Mrs. Rossetti gave her an edition for her own, and also for having introduced her to Jean Ingelow's *Poems*. The two friends were hardly narrow in their tastes.

Christina visited the Scotts at Newcastle-on-the-Tyne several times. She retained her friendship for Mr. Scott until the end of his life. When she heard that in his autobiography he had made adverse criticisms of Gabriel, she fought shy of seeing them, and when he was seventy or more, she sent him a bit of verse in which she assured him that her old admiration was "predilect still." When in London in the summer of 1860, Mrs. Scott wrote her husband of visiting the top of Highgate Hill, where the Saint

[26] Mackenzie Bell: *Christina Rossetti,* pp. 38-39.

[27] H. H. Gilchrist: *Anne Gilchrist, Her Life and Writings,* London, 1887, p. 138ff. They knew Whitman's poems first through William Rossetti, who edited a selection of them.

Mary Magdalene Home for fallen women was situated and where at times Christina assisted: "Christina is now an Associate, and wears the dress, which is very simple, elegant even; black with hanging sleeves, a muslin cap with lace edging, quite becoming to her with the veil."[28]

It was through these Newcastle friends that Christina made the acquaintance of Miss Alice Boyd of Penkill Castle, Ayrshire. She visited Penkill on at least three occasions, 1865, 1866, 1869. The castle garden was full of a profusion of flowers—marigolds, dark crimson gilly-flowers, field poppies, sunflowers fringed with flame.[29] No wonder that the color-loving Christina's first visit lengthened to seven weeks. She writes to Mrs. Gilchrist of her hostess as the "prettiest handsome woman" she had ever met. In her next visit, she writes home of how much she is enjoying her pleasant room and the fine country. "Ailsa Craig is a wonderfully poetical object continually in sight. Of small fry, jackdaws perch near the windows, and rabbits parade in full view of the house. The glen is lovely. And to crown all we are having pleasant mild summer."[30] She liked to look out of her window on the old-fashioned garden; she would stand there, sometimes composing, leaning forward, her elbows on the sill, her hands supporting her face, framed by the window in the very attitude in which Dante Gabriel shows her in a drawing of that year—the most frequently reproduced of his portraits of her. In letters written while she was at Penkill, she speaks of having had a glimpse of Browning in London and of having just missed a visit to Freshwater Bay, Isle of Wight, where she would have met Tennyson, an expectation which she was "too shy to contemplate with unmixed pleasure."

Among the other women friends of Christina's were Miss

[28] William Bell Scott: *Autobiographical Notes,* Vol. II, pp. 59-60.

[29] William Bell Scott describes the garden in a poem, *The Old Scotch House.*

[30] *Rossetti Papers,* p. 202.

Orme, who became the wife of Professor David Masson; Mrs. Orme, the sister-in-law of Coventry Patmore, a lady whom Thackeray dubbed "a jolly good fellow"; Mrs. Bodichon, the founder of Girton College; and the three poetesses, Adelaide Ann Procter, Jean Ingelow, and Dora Greenwell, the first of whom she knew only slightly. She met Jean Ingelow at Hastings, probably in March, 1865, Miss Ingelow then sharing with Tennyson the admiration of the general public. Christina jokes herself more than once on being envious of Miss Ingelow's talent or her productivity, perhaps of her popular success. In 1864, she told Mrs. Gilchrist to try to imagine her envy and humiliation on the receipt of Jean Ingelow's *eighth* edition, and told the same friend of how the prospect of meeting the favorite poetess had inspired her with trepidation.[31]

Dora Greenwell, the religious and mystic poetess of Northumberland, Christina met more than once in Newcastle and later in Clifton, and they corresponded freely. William Rossetti described Miss Greenwell as of the elegant, serious type, and Miss Ingelow speaks of her as tall, very slender, with a hesitating manner and "a soft cooing" voice; a woman who desired to influence others and to be influenced by them. Her health was very frail. When Christina met her in Clifton, she wrote to Gabriel of her: "She is far more dilapidated than myself, poor thing." In spite of her cooing voice and frail body, she was a woman of intellectual interests; she was a friend of William Knight, the professor of moral philosophy at St. Andrew's, and editor of Wordsworth, and corresponded with him on theological and philosophical subjects. Christina called her "large-minded." At one time they exchanged poems. Christina's is the sonnet called *Autumn Leaves,* and Miss Greenwell's is a directly personal tribute, *To Christina Rossetti,* in which she praises the color and the spirit—"the grapes and the wine"—of her friend's poetry.

[31] H. H. Gilchrist, *Anne Gilchrist,* pp. 147-48.

Thou hast filled me a golden cup
With a drink divine that glows,
With the bloom that is flowing up
From the heart of the folded rose.
The grapes in their amber glow
And the strength of the blood-red wine
All mingle and change and flow
In this golden cup of thine.
With the scent of the curling wine
With the balm of the rose's breath,—
For the voice of love is thine,
And thine is the song of death.[32]

September 17, 1875.

Miss Greenwell cared more for abstract thought than Christina and Miss Ingelow; she discussed Comte with Professor Knight and wrote to William Rossetti:

When I am at home and settled, I want to write to you upon the Pagan element, which seems to me to enter *inevitably* into all high and free literature and art. Your sister does not agree with me in this, nor Miss Ingelow, nor anybody; which makes me feel sure I am right. Athanasius against the world.

Miss Greenwell further differed from Miss Rossetti in the prodigality with which she offered her verses to the public; she published six volumes in 1848-76.

Jean Ingelow in 1861 and again in 1862 wrote poems for the Portfolio Society, to which Miss Procter, the parodist Calverly, and other popular verse writers belonged. The manuscript of Christina's vividly realistic poem of the twelve months, *The Year's Windfalls,* is labeled "This was written for the Portfolio Society," and is dated February 26, 1863, but her brother William knew nothing of her connection with the society.

When Jean Ingelow died in 1897, a correspondent sent to the *Athenaeum*[33] her recollections of Miss Greenwell's challenging the other two verse writers to produce samples of needlework as creditable as their poems: Miss Ingelow sent an embroidered

[32] W. Dorling: *Memoirs of Dora Greenwell,* London, 1885, p. 358.

[33] The *Athenaeum:* No. 3641, August 7, 1897.

workbag; Miss Greenwell a kettle holder; Christina, as far as the writer could remember, nothing. It is hardly possible to imagine a Rossetti placidly putting thread after thread into the decorating of an antimacassar.

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We turn from these acquaintances to the friend who proved the dearest and most valued of all, Charles Bagot Cayley. Mr. Cayley was born in St. Petersburg (Leningrad) on July 9, 1823. He was a student of King's College, London, and later was a Trinity College, Cambridge, graduate. He was known to the Rossetti family before the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood days, having studied Italian with Mr. Rossetti in 1846-47. His interests kept him in touch with this family of Dante students; during the years 1851-55, he was engaged with his translation of *The Divine Comedy,* a version employing the ternary rhyme of the original, and later he translated the sonnets and stanzas of Petrarch. He also translated the *Iliad* and *Prometheus Bound,* paraphrased the Psalms in meter, and published a little volume of original poems, *Psyche's Interlude* (1857). He was usually to be found in the reading room of the British Museum. The testimony of those who knew him was that he was altogether the unworldly scholar, sometimes absent and abstract but always gentle and courteous in an old-fashioned manner. William Rossetti thought him remarkably polite, perhaps in the Johnsonian sense, for the illustration he offers is that Mr. Cayley paid morning calls on ladies. Another friend, Frederic Shields, spoke of his face being always beautiful to him, one he liked to dwell upon. The Pre-Raphaelites admired his Dante translation; Ford Madox Brown painted him into a fresco in the Manchester Town Hall as the astronomer Crabtree of Broughton watching the transit of Venus; his son, Oliver Madox Brown, introduced him into the tale *The Dwale Bluth*[34] as Oliver Serpleton.

[34] Oliver Madox Brown: *The Dwale Bluth, Hebditch's Legacy, and*

This Oliver Serpleton of "Nolly" Brown's creation is a caricature of a woolgathering scholar. He is represented as of immense erudition; his *magnum opus* is a huge work: *Studies towards a Topographical and Archaeological and Historical Account of the North of Devonshire.* He says of himself: "I fear I am but little fitted for society, for I am immersed in my own studies usually"; his actions show that ordinarily he is indeed oblivious of sublunary circumstances. Nevertheless, in his unworldly generosity and gentleness, he is not an unlovable figure. Though his absent-mindedness was indirectly responsible for his wife's death, he had been tenderly affectionate to her and was faithful to her memory. He is spoken of as treating her physicians "with studied politeness and composure." Much in the portrait, minus its absurdities, parallels what Charles Cayley's friends said of him.

It was apparently not until 1862 that Mr. Cayley and Christina manifested especial interest in each other. In the second sonnet of *Monna Innominata* she wishes that she could remember the first day, hour, moment of his meeting her and wonders at her blindness in not foreseeing the budding of the tree which would blossom many a May in the future; yet she had let that day of days pass "as traceless as a thaw of bygone snow." Nevertheless, as early as 1854, Christina's one addition to the family memoranda about her father's death is this: "Mr. Cayley called twice at the very last, and waited, but did not see my father, much endearing himself to us."[35] It was ten years after this that Christina in August, 1864, wrote an amusing skit, *A Sketch,* which was obviously inspired by the scholar's shy tardiness in recognizing the fact that she was fully returning his own growing interest:

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*Other Literary Remains,* Vols. I and II, Edited by W. M. Rossetti and F. Hueffer, London, 1896.

[35] W. M. Rossetti: *Some Reminiscences,* Vol. I, p. 116.

My blindest buzzard that I know,
My special mole, when will you see?
Oh no, you must not look at me.
There's nothing hid for me to show.
I might show facts as plain as day;
But, since your eyes are blind, you'd say,
Where? What? and turn away.

He finally saw the situation and made a proposal of marriage, which Christina rejected. Her brother William years afterwards recalled that this occurred in 1864,[36] but in the *Family Letters* he implies a later date, 1866, for it was then that he offered the two people who he knew were lovers a home with him free of expense. Mr. Cayley had some time before lost money through unfortunate investments. William has printed Christina's letter in reply, in which after thanking him for his generosity, she says (September 11, 1866):

As to money, I might be selfish enough to wish that were the only bar, but you see from my point of view it is not. Now I am at least unselfish enough to deprecate seeing C.B.C. continually with nothing but mere feeling to offer to his hamper and discomfort; but, if he likes to see me, God knows I like to see him, and any kindness you will show him will only be an additional kindness loaded on me.[37]

The brother has recorded that her ultimate decision rested upon religious grounds alone.[38] He was not sure of the precise nature of the scholar's religious opinions and beliefs; he had been brought up in the Church of England, but on his declaring himself, Christina

must no doubt have probed his faith and found it either strictly wrong or woefully defective—she made up her mind on grounds she recognized as higher than any consideration of either feeling or expediency, and she remained immovable.[39]

An age given to taking its religious convictions lightly, priding itself on its tolerance in matters of creed, may reproach Chris-

[36] *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 312.
[37] *Family Letters of Christina Rossetti*, p. 29.
[38] W. M. Rossetti: *Some Reminiscences*, Vol. II, p. 313.
[39] *Poetical Works of Christina Rossetti: Memoir*, p. liii.

tina Rossetti, or may regret what seemed a futile sacrifice of the happiness of two people. Christina's time, however, was one when others too acted as she did: when an Emily Sellwood judged that on account of religious differences she had better not marry the Alfred to whose words she later so submissively set her music,[40] and when Ruskin's Rose was reproaching him for loving her better than he loved God and was writing in one of her tales: "I sought for human love, and I had not loved Him." Ruskin and Rose La Touche, Cayley and Christina Rossetti knew of no way of reaching a compromise without a loss of sincerity. What has been said of Ruskin and his adored Rose applies in principle to Christina and Cayley:

> Il faut s'incliner bien bas devant ces deux âmes, assez fortes pour sacrifier l'une sa vie, l'autre son bonheur á la sincérité absolue. Le grande Corneille les aurait trouvées dignes de ses héros.[41]

In Christina's poems, we may read the story of her love and her renunciation, and the story increases our sympathy, and in no wise lessens the honor we give a man and a woman unable by nature to deviate from utter truth in word and action.

She has told her story in the group of Italian lyrics, *Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente;* in the two sonnet series, *By Way of Remembrance* and *Monna Innominata;* and in many separate short poems. There is, too, much to be gathered concerning her state of mind from the chronology of her religious and love lyrics. The most assuredly personal of these poems is the series of twenty-one lyrics in Italian, *Il Rosseggiar dell' Oriente.* William Rossetti found them in her writing desk after her death, until then probably seen only by the author. The facts that she did not show anyone the poems and that they were written not in the language of the country but in Italian suggest that the writer intended them as an unlocking of her heart for herself alone.

[40] Canon Rawnsley: *Memoirs of the Tennysons,* Glasgow, 1900, p. 71.

[41] Quoted from Jacques Bardoux: *John Ruskin,* p. 139, by E. T. Cook in *Life of John Ruskin,* London, 1911, p. 267.

They are not only more personal than the English poems but they also express a greater variety of moods. The first is dated December, 1862, the last August, 1868, though only three belong to the years before 1867-68. They are apparently poems of the first intention, spontaneous expressions of immediate and often poignant feelings. In the first of the series, December, 1862, she asks the question—"Is love sleeping?" then decides that love is not allotted to her in this life. A few days later she meditates—Is love awake? If love says "Hope," say "Love," yet "I do not say so." The third early poem is a reference to a trivial gift to Cayley. Then in the succeeding poems, she lets herself go and reveals passionate yearning for the presence of her lover and for ever-renewed assurances from him of his love. The house where he lives must be happy; how happy his mother and sister who have full right to be with him, and yet she would not exchange her love for such love as theirs, for hers is sweeter, closer. Though he comes not, yet perhaps some day he will come. If she were dear to him, would he not come? In illness she turns her face towards his home thinking that if they were together, heaven would be theirs. Did he not know that one said *no* wishing to say *yes?* He had preferred truth to her; this Truth whom he loves more than he loves her, it is Jesus, who, unknown to him, had yet spoken to him and vanquished his heart. Her closing verses are the saddest:

Io più ti amai che non mi amasti tu:—
Amen, se cosi volle Iddio Signor;
Amen, quantunque mi si spezzi il cor,
Signor Gesu.

Ma Tu che Ti ricordi e tutto sai,
Tu che moristi per virtù d'amor,
Nell' altro mondo donami quel cor
Che tanto amai.[42]

August, 1868

[42] I have loved you more than you have loved me:—
Amen, if God so wills it;

If these poems were the only story of their love, the reader would judge that the lover had lost her because he was not persistent enough, had not come back to urge a second or a third time his offer of love and marriage. We wonder if the shy, silent scholar did not delay his suit until during a period of hope deferred, emotions other than her love for him had gathered strength in Christina's being. Before she wrote the greater number of the Italian lyrics and very possibly while she was thinking of the probability of marriage, she was writing poems of earthly and spiritual love which doubtless reveal the emotional conflict through which she was passing. In November, 1863, she had written the exquisite lyric *Somewhere or Other,* in which she wonders if somewhere there is the heart that had not yet made answer to her words. *Meeting,* composed a few weeks before the humorous *Sketch* already cited, hinges on the question in the following lines:

> If we live we shall meet again:
> But tonight, good-bye.
> One word, let but one be heard—
> What, not one word?

The devotional verses of 1864 begin with a sonnet in which she longs for the time gone by

> when thought of Christ
> Made His yoke easy and His burden light.

He whom she had half-forgotten calls her to Him and she realizes anew that "Love is Christ and Christ is all in all." In October her strong and beautiful poem *Despised and Rejected* is the story of Christ's knocking at a door which will not open to Him,

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> Amen, though my heart is breaking,
> Lord Jesus.
>
> But Thou who rememberest and knowest all,
> Thou who died for love,
> Give me in the other world that heart
> Which I have loved so much.
> August, 1868.

while she who is within cries out that He should leave her in peace, vex her no more. A few days afterwards, she writes a sad little poem of resignation: "I go, Lord, where Thou sendest me," and then again she hesitates:

I love and love not; Lord, it breaks my heart
To love and not to love.

The poems of the ensuing months are the prayers of one who thirsts for Christ until in February, 1866, the sonnet *After Communion* expresses with more assurance than any other of her poems the mystic's belief in God as friend, love, spouse: all heaven is open to her whom Christ has called His friend. Whether she was right or not, had she not come to believe that human love so far as she was concerned had been transmuted into love for God, and she must give her heart wholly to Christ?

The sonnet series in English as well as other poems testify that her conflict between two duties, two affections, was by no means ended. The four sonnets, *By Way of Remembrance,* written about October, 1870 (one being dated October 23), were not published by Christina; the fourth of the series has a much more personal note than in its revised form as Sonnet 10 of *Monna Innominata,* which she did publish. This is also true of the single sonnet *Cor Mio* of about 1875 as compared with its final version, *Later Life,* 18. The note struck in *Cor Mio* and in *By Way of Remembrance* is that of self-accusation for having bartered roses for rue in life's mart, and that of praise for a friend silent, and strong, and true, and generous. One comfort to her is that she loves him and he knows it; the other, that life done, love would annul loss and decay and death, and "love alone would be." In none of these or in the later poems is there the slightest suggestion of the loved one's being at fault. If there was error, it was hers.

*Monna Innominata* was printed in her 1881 volume, *A Pageant and Other Poems.* The title and the explanation she prefixed to the series are just such a gesture of concealment for the

intimately personal as the title *Sonnets from the Portuguese.* Having referred to the tribute paid to Beatrice and Laura, she writes

> These heroines of worldwide fame were preceded by a bevy of unnamed ladies, *donne innominate,* sung by a school of less conspicuous poets; and in that land and that period which gave simultaneous birth to Catholics, to Albigenses, and to Troubadours, one can imagine many a lady as sharing her lover's poetic aptitude, while the barrier between them might be one held sacred by both, yet not such as to render mutual love incompatible with mutual honor.[43]

Such a *donna innominata* speaks for herself in the fourteen lyrics of Christina's "Sonnet of Sonnets." It is a dignified and tender utterance of deep love and of regret at separation from one of high and honored excellence, and yet of loyal faith in love and its immortality; the tone is pitched lower than in the earlier poems though the poetry is more beautiful.

> Youth gone and beauty gone, what doth remain?
> The longing of a heart pent up forlorn,
> A silent heart whose silence loves and longs;
> The silence of a heart which sang its songs
> While youth and beauty made a summer morn,
> Silence of love that cannot sing again.

After her—or their—rejection of marriage, Christina remained on terms of affectionate intimacy not only with Charles Cayley but also with his sisters and his brother, Professor Arthur Cayley of Cambridge. The letters exchanged between Christina and Charles Cayley from 1866 until his death suggest a tragic, middle-aged acceptance of an unescapable situation and a disposition to make the most of little points of contact and of opportunities of seeing each other. He wishes a letter from her when he is housebound with an injured foot, and she sees to it that William Rossetti expresses his sympathy on the death of Cayley's mother. He addresses her as "Dear Miss Christina Rossetti" or "Dear Christina Rossetti," and to her he is "My dear

[43] *Poetical Works,* p. 58.

old Friend." In her letters to her brothers, she refers to his calling and remaining to dinner, to her meeting him at the Museum, or to his taking a hand at whist with the ladies at Torrington Square. Not long before his death, she writes to him in reply to his making known the nature of his legacy to her; she wishes him to do nothing for her contrary to the wishes of his family:

> very likely there was a moment when—and no wonder—those who loved you best thought very severely of me, and indeed I deserve severity at my own hands,—and I never seemed to get much at yours,[44]

The letter indicates that if Cayley survived her mother and herself, he would be her legatee after William was paid what she regarded as her indebtedness to him for her support. Mr. Cayley made her his literary executor and provided that she should receive the sums yet payable on his publications, his

> best writing-desk and any packet that may be lying therein addressed to her, and she shall be entitled to reclaim or order to be destroyed any letters of hers which may be found among my papers or effects.[45]

He died on her birthday, December 5, 1883.

> When Christina was at the Litany, Professor and Mrs. Cayley called to tell her the dreadful news that their brother Charles had been found dead in his bed the morning (Thursday) before. Coming in, Christina saw them; then went and saw her dear friend lying just as found in the attitude of sleep, his hand, that is, raised to his face. . . . Christina bought a beautiful wreath at Covent Garden, and herself laid it on the sheet where other flowers were lying.[46]

When she went to Somerset House to tell William of their friend's death, she did not break down, but he recorded: "I shall not easily forget the look of her face and the strain of self-command in her voice."[47] In January, Christina went to Hastings to visit Mr. Cayley's grave, and the following May, she wrote of his burial place the stanzas called *One Seaside Grave.*

[44] *Family Letters of Christina Rossetti,* pp. 124-25.
[45] *Ibid.,* p. 140.
[46] *Ibid.,* Mrs. Rossetti's Diary: December 7, 1883, p. 230.
[47] W. M. Rossetti: *Some Reminiscences,* Vol. II, p. 314.

They reflect the thought and the refrain of two earlier lyrics, which doubtless refer, too, to the quiet scholar whom she loved deeply and permanently: "Shall I forget?" and "Should one of us remember, and one of us forget."[48]

One Seaside Grave

Unmindful of the roses,
Unmindful of the thorn,
A reaper tired reposes
Among his gathered corn;
So might I, till the morn!

Cold as the cold Decembers,
Past as the days that set,
While only one remembers
And all the rest forget,—
But one remembers yet.

[48] *Poetical Works,* pp. 374, 398.

## Chapter V

## WILLIAM AND DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

The room whereinto no one entered save herself alone Christina dedicated to Charles Cayley. He was more to her than her brothers; yet those brothers occupied a large place in Christina's life. The story, then, of her family life during her womanhood, especially with regard to her relations with Dante Gabriel and William Michael, is important, though outwardly it may seem to be mainly a chronicle of changes of residence, visits to seaside resorts and travel, marriages, and deaths.[1] Always there must be borne in mind the enveloping action, the mutual love and dependence of Christina and her mother, a love and dependence which grew and strengthened with the years.

The family, with the exception of Gabriel, lived on Albany Street until 1867, Miss Margaret Polidori having an apartment with them. After her death in the February of that year, William with his mother and sisters moved in June to 56 Euston Square (now 5 Endsleigh Gardens). Ford Madox Ford has called attention to how the Rossettis and their friends circled about Bloomsbury, that dull section of central London with its cheap lodgings for tourists and students, its long unlovely streets and its many squares and crescents trimmed with dusty trees. Brown lived on Fitzroy Square, Morris on Red Lion, Cayley at South Crescent, and Mrs. Rossetti and Christina were to seek Torrington. Ford supposes that "they sang of Launcelot and

[1] Principal authorities for this chapter: *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, His Family Letters; The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti; Rossetti Papers, 1862-1870; Some Reminiscences of W. M. Rossetti; Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism.*

Guinevere to take their minds off their surroundings, having been driven into their surroundings by the desire for cheap rents and respectable addresses."[2] After William Rossetti's marriage in 1874, his mother and younger sister were often with Misses Charlotte and Eliza Polidori at Bloomsbury Square until the four settled at 30 Torrington Square, which was Christina's home until her death.

Christina, however, rather frequently made visits of a few weeks at a time to resorts, usually on the coast of Sussex or Kent, and generally with her mother or sister. Folkestone she visited as early as 1846, and again in 1871; she was in Hastings with her cousin Henrietta Polydore, on account of the health of both, during the winter and early spring of 1864-65, as well as at other times, and she spent several seasons after 1870 in Eastbourne. She spoke of the latter as "a nice place" where she and her mother both throve. When she was there in 1876, she stayed with Maria at the All Saints Hospital, and on several later occasions was at the All Saints Convalescent Hospital, Meads, Eastbourne, both of these houses being connected with the All Saints Sisterhood which Maria entered. So too, at Clifton, near Bath, she spent several weeks in the All Saints Mission House. On a visit to Eastbourne in 1880, she wrote Gabriel how their mother at eighty was well able to sit out for about three hours daily, and to enjoy the sights and movement on the Parade. Christina thought her brother would judge as horrors the idlers, brass bands, negro minstrels of the resort, but she, "more frivolous," was in a degree amused. In 1878 she was at Walton-on-the-Naze and the following year at Seaford, "a rather desolate looking little place," yet with a pretty country walk within range besides "inexhaustible beach." With her mother and aunts, she was at another time delightfully housed at Fayremeads, Sevenoaks, a neighborhood to which some of the Pre-Raphaelites had once resorted for realistic background.

[2] Ford Madox Ford: *Ancient Lights.*

The fact that her uncle Henry Polydore lived in Gloucester drew her there on occasional visits: she enjoyed the fine old city and the vicinity where she was interested in Llanthony Abbey and what was left of an ancient wall. More than once she was in Cheltenham, and she wrote Mrs. Gilchrist of how delightful she found Malvern—"its grand old Priory and view commanding hills."[3]

There are a few bits of vivid description in her letters from these various places. Clifton she found refreshingly tree-full and there she saw great white magnolia blooms and the rare sight, for England, of a myrtle in blossom. But more frequently the sights and sounds of the seashore are reflected in her prose and poetry. Hastings is the scene of three of the tales in the volume, *Commonplace and Other Short Stories;* and in Sonnet 17 of *Later Life,* while in Bloomsbury, she longs for the Sussex town:

> Something of this foggy day, a something which
> Is neither fog nor of today,
> Has set me dreaming of the winds that play
> Past certain cliffs, along one certain beach,
> And turn the topmost edge of waves to spray:
> Ah pleasant pebbly strand so far away,
> So out of reach while quite within my reach.

In other poems, there are glimpses of the sea quivering under the wind and of the foaming sea horses tossing and turning over.

With her unfailing affection for small quaint creatures, she liked to plod indefinitely along the shingle with her eyes glued to the ground searching out marine trophies. So she writes verses on the iridescent sea-mouse (*Aphrodite aculeata*) which Mr. Cayley sent her, and in the poem *By the Sea* she praises the sheer miracles of loveliness which lie hid in the unlooked-on bed of the ocean, as well as

> Shells quaint with curve or spot or spike,
> Encrusted live things argus-eyed.

[3] H. H. Gilchrist: *Anne Gilchrist: Her Life and Writings,* p. 147.

However much she enjoyed these seaside visits, she seemed always glad to be once more in the sweet security of her London street. With reference to her home, she comments humorously: "whatever its aspect to outsiders, was there ever yet a snail who preferred the bravest nautilus floating to his own convenient shell?" In the convenient shell lived the family on whom she showered the wealth of her love—and not many squares to the south, was there not Mr. Cayley?

The first to leave the home was the elder sister, Maria Francesca. She had not only worked as a governess but also tried to add to the family income by producing a textbook, an exercise book in Italian. Christina enthusiastically helped her so that her name like those of her brothers and sister might endorse a book. Unfortunately for Maria's hopes, the book yielded no profit until ten years after her death and it was not until 1892 that the surviving sister received most unexpectedly some twelve pounds from the publishers. In 1871 Maria published *The Shadow of Dante,* an explanatory comment on *The Divine Comedy* with copious quotations. Maria had always seemed a religious by nature, a religious of a sane and cheerful variety. It was not surprising, then, that as Anglo-Catholic religious orders for women increased in numbers and effectiveness, Maria should associate herself with one. She entered the All Saints Sisterhood, Margaret Street, in 1873, and in the following year was "professed." Gabriel was deeply concerned over this step and wrote to his mother:

> Maria will indeed be a great loss, being much the healthiest in mind and cheeriest of us all, except yourself. William comes next, and Christina and I are nowhere.

At Christmastide he especially disliked her absence from the family. Though friends thought that Maria's austerely religious influence on her younger sister did not conduce to that sister's happiness, Christina always had only the most affectionate and admiring things to say of her. The best known of these tributes

is that to a sister's love at the end of *Goblin Market;* there is, too, the rondeau beginning "My love whose heart is tender,"[4] and there are many references in her prose works—one in *Time Flies* "to her in whose life was the law of kindness." This last is the reading of the diary for Maria's birthday, February 17.

Until Christina was over forty years old, first in her father's home and then in William's, she lived with that "brother of brothers." She was substantially dependent on him from 1854 until 1876, and it was not until after the death of Gabriel and her mother that she became possessed of sufficient means with which to compensate him financially. She had much to say to her friends about his never-failing liberality and thoughtfulness. Among much else, she owed to him two particularly happy experiences. In 1861 he took her and their mother on a five weeks' trip to Paris, Normandy, and Jersey. They reached Paris on June 10 and returned to England on July 13. Then, in 1865, just after Christina had made ready her second volume of poems for transmission to Macmillan, the three went together to Switzerland and Italy—the visit being one of the radiant hours in a life too often in the shadow.[5] From Paris they traveled to Bâle and Lucerne, and by carriage over the St. Gotthard Pass to Como. After two weeks in Northern Italy, they made their way back to Paris by the Falls of Schaffhausen and Strasbourg. Christina boasted, "Not one drawback worth dwelling upon occurred to mar our contentment."

They saw many pictures and many churches. Christina must have been impressed with the tomb of the Italian St. Augustine at the Certosa of Pavia and by the quaint Strasbourg clock, which transformed into material symbols her own imaginative realization of the transitoriness of life, for there the figure of Childhood strikes the first quarter; Youth, the second; Man-

[4] *Poetical Works,* p. 132, Note, p. 469.

[5] The account of this trip is given in William's diary in *Rossetti Papers,* pp. 104-131.

hood, the third; and Death, the hour. She ascended the roof of the Duomo in Milan and felt keen delight in the beauty of the forest of statues and pinnacles above and below her. However, she wrote Mrs. Gilchrist of her trip:" I don't say a word about art treasures; the truth being that I far prefer nature treasures."

Of these nature treasures she afterwards mentioned most often Lake Como and the Alps as first seen. To the friend already named, she wrote of the majesty of St. Gotthard and of the lake with its nightingales. At Como, Christina and William went out in a boat for an hour, the boatman, "a good-looking characteristic Italian," and heard a nightingale in the wooded hills overlooking the lake. In the twenty-first sonnet of *Later Life,* Christina writes with happiness of how on that evening at Como on the lake all things were musical: "For June that night glowed like a doubled June." The twenty-second sonnet recalls how they plunged down St. Gotthard,

> All Switzerland behind us on the ascent,
> All Italy before us.

The sonnet is Wordsworthian in its account of the delight and the awe with which the mountains moved her and struck from silent chords harmonies which memory would always hoard.

She and her mother were affected most of all by what Italy herself was to their half-Italian hearts; Christina wrote, "I am glad of my Italian blood." To the short stay in Italy belongs *En Route,* a tribute to the land which had stolen her heart, to its sons and daughters who had welcomed her with warm smiles and gentle speech. Probably immediately after her return to England, she composed *Italia, Io ti Saluto,* an exquisite song of her sorrow over leaving the sweet South, the country half her own, and returning to that bleak North,

> Where I was born, bred, look to die:
> Come back to do my day's work in its day,
> Play out my play—
> Amen, amen, say I.

It was several years after this Italian trip and also after Christina's severe illness that William became engaged in July, 1873, to the artist's daughter, Lucy Madox Brown. From Kelmscott where she was visiting Gabriel, Christina wrote to Lucy, and then to William she sent the strongest of wishes for his happiness from the sister whom he had "cared for all his life." Two years after William's marriage Mrs. Rossetti and Christina carried out the plan which Christina had from the beginning thought wise—the establishment of a separate home to be shared with the two Polidori sisters. They moved to 30 Torrington Square on October 1, 1876. There was, however, constant intercourse between William and his family an dthe Torrington Square household. When they did not see one another, they wrote letters.

One of the early artist friends of the Rossettis told Mr. Mackenzie Bell that both brothers adored their younger sister, especially Gabriel. Although he liked to joke her about the dismalness of her poetry, he evidently felt in her the quality of mystery, of spiritual beauty, which he tried to catch and paint with brush or with pen. In the *Scraps* of prose found in his manuscripts is this description: "Christina—the isolation of a bird, remote, minute, and distinct; shy like a bird."[6] Gabriel's most recent biographer, R. L. Mégroz, has brought together the many likenesses between the two poets, physical, temperamental, and even spiritual. By nature the man may have been more attuned to the mystic than the woman, but not for him that first rung of the *scala perfectionis,* the purgation, the self-discipline, by which the soul might subordinate the flesh and approach unity with God; not for him, the renunciations which came to be a great part of his sister's life. Gabriel once said to William Allingham "in a conclusive tone"—"I never do anything I don't like." Christina left undone so many things that by nature she would have liked to do. The attraction to both of them of the un-

[6] *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti:* Edited by W. M. Rossetti, London, 1911, p. 636.

seen manifests itself in his choices from among her poems. Except for his praise as *greatest* bestowed upon her objective lyric, *Today for Me,* he chose as her noblest poems two (*After Death* and *At Home*) which have to do with the borderland between life and death, a state in which the spirit clings to the old familiar things and yet can no longer sensibly affect them; and a third, the sonnet *After Communion,* already mentioned as the utterance of the Christian mystic who attains such exaltation through the Eucharistic sacrament that she is drawn into the love of God.

In more material spheres, their tastes had much in common. They liked the same stories; neither had any exact discriminating knowledge of nature, though both with a few strokes could make others see what they saw; and with their brother William, they enjoyed the comicality or grotesqueness of animals. Everyone knows of Dante Gabriel's menagerie at Tudor House, but William and Christina, too, were always visiting zoos, and reporting to each other or to Gabriel what they observed. Among their strange pets, the wombat was the favorite. The frequency with which the little Australian animal is mentioned in their letters or memoirs becomes amusing to the reader. William and Christina discovered him in the Zoo; Christina made drawings of him, Italianized his name, and wrote an Italian verse on the subject for Gabriel's amusement, *L'Uommibatto.* While he was at work on his Arthurian frescoes at the Oxford Union, Gabriel sketched him on the whitened window: "a delightful creature—the most comical little beast." And finally the particular wombat which Gabriel would allow to doze in the middle of his dining-table received immortality from one of the welcome guests at that table, for it was the original Dormouse of *Alice in Wonderland.* Christina writes news in her letters of the activity of tree-frogs, of lizards, or of alligators. Gabriel presumes that since Christina is enjoying herself at Penkill, some "small deer" must have turned up to make her happy; "Perhaps even a hedge-

hog may have taught her that all tears are not born of sorrow."[7] One gift of the brothers to their sister was a comical Japanese carving of a creature of unearthly aspect, and Gabriel gave her a drawing by Griset of crocodiles or alligators, and a second picture of an individual large alligator, which figures in her nonsense verses on the "Prudent Crocodile."

From the beginning of her verse-making Dante Gabriel was keenly interested in Christina's literary work and in its publication and recognition. With regard to this practical concern Christina pays tribute, however, to both him and William as most brotherly of brothers. Gabriel was at first her chief abettor. He was delighted that *Up Hill* attracted so much admiration and wrote to Allingham of his sister's pennyworth of wheat among the pebbles of "Macmillan's Macademy of stones for bread." He then urged the publication of *Goblin Market* and later of *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems.* The two corresponded and consulted regarding the poems which were to be included; Gabriel drew designs for each volume, selected the binding, and saw to the transmission to the publishers of the manuscripts. His recently published correspondence with Ellis shows that he performed a similar office with regard to *Commonplace and Other Short Stories.* He was naturally interested in the illustrations of her books: those by Miss Boyd for *Commonplace,* and by Arthur Hughes for *Sing-Song* and *Speaking Likenesses* (the verses and the tales for children), as well as designs for single poems. He wrote to her of Arthur Hughes's painting for *My Birthday* and to his mother of the illustration of *Maiden-Song* by Mrs. Boyle and Ruskin's friend Lady Waterford. He often sent Christina clippings of the press notices of her books and told her with gusto of compliments she was receiving: in October, 1868, he read aloud "a vast amount of Christina" at Penkill, but everyone knew it already; Gladstone, he was told by

[7] *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Letters to Miss Alice Boyd,* chosen and arranged by John Purves, *Fortnightly Review,* N.S., May 1, 1928, Vol. 123.

Lady Waterford, could repeat *Maiden Song* by heart. To her first volume, he called the attention of his American acquaintance, Professor Norton; "perhaps he'd find it worth looking at"; and he discussed her poetry with their friends William Sharp, Theodore Watts-Dunton, Hall Caine, and Swinburne. Though generous with praise, he was of course too much the poet and the artist not to be discriminating.

He enjoyed, too, jokes at her expense. The *Times* criticism upon the *Goblin Market* volume used the phrase, "Miss Rossetti can point to work which could not easily be mended." Gabriel promptly sent her a sketch of herself in a frenzy battering the furniture with a hammer into irreparable bits and burning bank-notes in the firegrate. When he sent his mother a group of sonnets, *Willowood, Lost Days,* and such grave pieces, he wrote:

> I send you my sonnets, which are such a lively band of bogies that they may join with the skeletons of Christina's various closets, and entertain you by a ballet.[8]

And it must have been with his tongue in his cheek that he proposed to her that she should change the title of her sentimental verses *Husband and Wife* to *Grave Clothes and Baby Clothes.* He sent his own poems to her, however, for her to read and give any hints that occurred to her; this is true not only of the poems of the 1870 volume but also of such late productions as *The White Ship,* with reference to which she wished that he would write more often historic ballads of a similar strain.

Among the many ties between them was their adoration of their mother. A pleasing instance of this is their present to her on her eightieth birthday. Christina gave her a copy of David Main's *Treasury of English Sonnets,* and Dante Gabriel inserted into it the illustrated manuscript of his own sonnet on the sonnet. It was with her mother that Christina would spend Christmas with him and that she visited him on the various occasions when he was making a protracted stay away from London. They were

[8] *Family Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti,* Vol. II, p. 200.

with him at Kelmscott Manor with the Morrises in July, 1873; at Aldwick Lodge, Bognor, in Sussex, for Christmas, 1876; and at Herne Bay in August, 1877, on the latter of which occasions Theodore Watts-Dunton was a fellow guest and about which he has told some pleasant anecdotes.[9]

Long before this, there was for a short time a slight rift in the relationship of the brother and sister. Rossetti wished no reservations in anyone's admiration of Elizabeth Siddall, his "Guggum"; Christina evidently made some, and Gabriel was annoyed. Ford Madox Brown entered in his diary for September 23, 1855, "Christina Rossetti came here from Tuesday even until Saturday. There is coldness between her and Gabriel because she and Guggum do not agree."[10] This coldness had perhaps begun even sooner; Mr. Mégroz half jestingly wonders if Christina were not a little jealous of Miss Siddall's skill in drawing. But no one needs to seek for reasons for a sister's lack of whole-hearted approbation of a prospective sister-in-law, and in this case the coldness was never frigid and was later entirely removed. During her brother's long engagement she wrote a vividly descriptive sonnet of his studio where the face of the woman whom he was to marry looked out from all the canvases in diverse guises:

> A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
> A nameless girl in freshest summer greens,
> A saint, an angel—every canvas means,
> The same one meaning neither more nor less.[11]

After Lizzie Rossetti's tragic death, Christina was especially interested in the possible publication of her sad little poems, at one time considering their being included in her own 1865-66 volume. Of those she admired, she remarked, "How full of beauty they are, but how painful."[12] Just then Christina was

[9] Theodore Watts-Dunton: *Old Familiar Faces,* "Christina Rossetti."
[10] W. M. Rossetti: *Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism,* p. 46.
[11] *Poetical Works,* p. 330.
[12] W. M. Rossetti: *Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism,* p. 78.

locking away in her own bureau drawer poems hardly less poignant in pathos and far more beautiful in thought and music, her poems of love and separation.

It was after Gabriel's eyesight became affected in 1867 that he began taking chloral to correct insomnia, the chloral accompanied by too much whiskey. During the years of illness, of mental depression, and of moral deterioration that followed, his mother and Christina were often with him. They never knew of his attempt at suicide, Christina being ill at the time. She was never hard on the weaknesses of which she did know, this tolerant saint of Victorian days. Gabriel's friend, Mr. Watts-Dunton, said of her that she would of course be sorry for the lapses of every soul, but for these there was a forgiveness which her own lapses could never claim. Gabriel remained to the end attentive to her and their mother. It was only to go to their house that he would leave his own while he was in London in the six clouded years of the end of his life, and they were from time to time with him at Tudor House. He and Christina exchanged notes, hers being cheerful accounts of the doings of her mother and herself and interested comments or inquiries as to his poems. When the end did come on April 9, 1882, at Birchington-on-the-Sea, those with him were his young friend, Hall Caine, Mrs. Rossetti, and Christina. The artist Mr. John Seddon had put his cottage, Westcliff Bungalow, at Rossetti's disposal, and the mother and sister were there for several weeks with him before his death on Easter Day.

The two following summers Christina and her mother were in Birchington arranging for the memorial to the dearly loved brother and son. Madox Brown designed an Irish cross as the tombstone, for which the sister and the surviving brother paid, and Mr. Frederic Shields designed the two stained glass lights of the church window, which Mrs. Rossetti installed.

Immediately after her brother's death Christina composed the poem *Birchington Churchyard,* which pictures the lowly hill of

cross-marked mounds rising above the "flat-shored sea of low-voiced creeping tide," and which closes with the chanting lines:

A lowly hope, a height that is but low,
While Time sets solemnly,
While the tide rises of Eternity,
Silent and neither swift nor slow.

## Chapter VI

## TORRINGTON SQUARE
1876-1894

### 1

Torrington Square is an oblong situated a few hundred yards northwest of the British Museum and connected with it by British Museum Avenue. Extending down the center of the oblong is a little park within an iron fence, the denizens of the Square owning keys to the iron gate. Number 30 is a narrow brick house of three stories above the ground floor, as unattractive in its exterior as the other unattractive houses of the Square. Christina Rossetti's first biographer, Mr. Mackenzie Bell, has described the interior as he knew it in the two years before Christina's death, and as it was before then from information given him by the family. On the first floor behind the dining room was a small room, which Christina used as a sitting room until the later years of her life when the large drawing-room of the second floor came to be the spot in which she spent the greater part of her time and did her writing. Earlier she had written in her small bedroom which adjoined the drawing-room. The house was plainly furnished though there were some good pieces of Chippendale and on the drawing-room walls were hung Dante Gabriel's portraits of his mother, William, Christina, and himself, with a few photographs of some of his other works. Later Christina placed above her couch a fine painting of "The Good Shepherd" by Frederic George Stephens.[1]

Gabriel objected to the Torrington Square residence; for he

[1] Mackenzie Bell: *Christina Rossetti,* p. 136 ff.

was convinced that for the one hundred guineas rent which the family paid, they could have had a better house with a large garden and with pleasanter surroundings. Christina, however, lived at Number 30 for eighteen years. When she moved there at Michaelmas, 1876, the household consisted of her mother, herself, her aunt Eliza Polidori, and her Aunt Charlotte, when the latter had a holiday from her duties as the Dowager Marchioness of Bath's companion. Maria had already become a member of the All Saints Sisterhood and in November of that same year died. The separation from William had not occurred under wholly happy circumstances. Before William's marriage Christina had feared that her ill health—especially her cough—and what she often called her irritability would annoy his wife, and that the mutual irritation between his wife and his sister would embarrass William. When the separation of the two households was finally arranged two years later, Christina wrote her sister-in-law:

> I hope, when two roofs shelter us and when faults which I regret are no longer your daily trial, that we may regain some of the liking which we had as friends, and which I should wish to be only the more tender and warm now that we are sisters. Don't, please, despair of my doing better.

William's comment suggests his characteristic justice:

> It will be seen that in respect of any past differences, Christina here takes blame to herself, and imputes none to her correspondent. There might be something to remark about this, but the less said the better.[2]

The reader is not altogether displeased at finding that Christina was perhaps not wholly faultless. The later intercourse between the sisters-in-law bears witness to normally friendly or affectionate relations.

Upon Christina devolved the duty of looking after the household affairs of the Torrington establishment. Though she was temperamentally disinclined to such occupation, she made herself a careful housekeeper who saw to practical details and kept

[2] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, p. 58.

accurate accounts. Rather often she refers to the burdensomeness of household responsibilities, but these references belong especially to the years when she was combining the office of housekeeper with that of nurse to her ageing and invalid aunts. When her three nieces were nearly women, she wrote to Lucy Rossetti:

> At present I am in the mood to feel hurried—not to say alas! to feel *worried*—with the various things which must be done. Laugh at your inert sister-in-law, my dear Lucy: and erect her as scarecrow to frighten Helen and Mary from such moods and ways; Olive seems not to need the warning.[3]

When she was assisting her artist friend, Mr. Shields, to find lodgings in Birchington at the time he was working on the memorial to Gabriel, she sent to him explicit particulars about each cottage: kitchen fire at Mrs. Jakes's was " 1 5/6 per week"; at Mrs. Harris's "1$^{s}$ do."[4]

The occupations of the Polidori-Rossetti family had little variety. There was no theatergoing and very little attending of social functions of any sort. Until the death of Gabriel, Christina and her mother, as already noted, would pay him visits either outside of London or at Tudor House in Chelsea, and his evening visits would break the quiet of his mother's household where Christina might be taking a hand at cribbage, bézique, or whist, with her mother and Aunt Eliza or Aunt Charlotte, or it might be with so welcome a visitor as Charles Cayley. Sometimes for other friends, there was tea and a rubber of whist. Chess, Christina had given up early because she felt herself unduly eager to win. Other evenings she passed reading aloud to the old ladies. The Polidori sisters were all exemplary Christians. Aunt Charlotte was "a most amiable good woman, less out of the world than other Polidoris, but not less religious."[5]

[3] Mackenzie Bell: *Christina Rossetti,* p. 119.
[4] *Ibid.,* p. 100.
[5] *Poetical Works,* p. lvii.

Christina characterized Aunt Eliza—her of Red Cross prowess—as "a good unobtrusive Christian,"[6] and she spoke of her mother's confidence in Mr. Shields as arising in part from his being so devout. Church going and church work occupied much of the time of the three sisters and Christina. Christ Church, Woburn Square, was very near and the ladies attended communion there every Sunday and Thursday. One specific charitable employment of the poet and her mother was the making of scrapbooks for hospital children, Christina having made some fifty before 1885.[7]

Christina at different times either expressed herself on certain social problems or showed her interest in action. She was strongly opposed to vivisection after she found that the victims were not always insensible during the operation. As early as 1875 she persuaded Gabriel to sign an anti-vivisection petition,[8] and eight years later made the same request of Mr. Shields. The latter also signed at her instance Parliamentary petitions regarding a "Minors' Protectionist" bill[9] (this concerned "the age of consent") and a memorial against an "Institute for Preventive Medicine," which would, she feared, establish "Pasteur's treatment and other horrors" in their midst.[10] The conservatism shown in these sympathies is yet more strongly evinced in Christina's attitude towards women's rights. She once had what she called "a courteous tilt in the strong-minded woman's list" with Mrs. Augusta Webster. Mrs. Webster, who twice served as a member of the London School Board, had written articles in favor of woman suffrage in the *Examiner*. After these had been reprinted in leaflet form, she sent them to Christina and invited her support. The latter was not wholly opposed to suffrage, but

[6] Mackenzie Bell: *Christina Rossetti,* p. 160.
[7] *Ibid.,* p. 55.
[8] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* p. 51.
[9] Mackenzie Bell: *Christina Rossetti,* p. 94.
[10] *Ibid.,* p. 110.

was very skeptical as to the rightness of the self-assertion of women and their rivalry with men. "Does it not appear as if the Bible was based upon an understood, unalterable, distinction between men and women, their position, duties, privileges?"[11] Again, "I do not think the present social movements tend on the whole to uphold Christianity or that the influence of some of our most prominent and gifted women is exerted in that direction: and thus thinking I cannot aim at 'Women's Rights.' "[11] Elsewhere she is inclined to be amused over "nimble-witted individuals of our lesser sex";[12] men are expected to exhibit "keener, tougher, more workworthy gifts."[13] She writes in both prose and verse of woman as the "help meet for man," but she also argues for mutual dependence. Man and woman are the right and left hands: the first may be "labourer, acquirer, achiever," yet the left is more liable to undergo hurt, to be cut.[14] "Men work and think, but women feel."[15]

There was less conservatism in certain other interests of hers. In 1860 there had been established the Victoria Press under the auspices of the Association for the Promotion of Social Service, the aim of which was to provide employment for women in London. Emily Faithful was the publisher for this press, which employed only women. To each of her two anthologies of 1863, *Poems: An Offering to Lancashire* and *A Welcome,* Christina contributed a poem, other contributors being Gabriel Rossetti, W. B. Scott, C. B. Cayley, Mary Howitt, Charles Kingsley, and Owen Meredith. Much later, Christina's friend, Ellen Proctor, recounts how interested the poet was in the work Miss Proctor was doing on Monday nights (1886-87) at the Factory Girls' Club, London Street, but how unable she was to join in the

[11] *Ibid.,* pp. 111, 112.
[12] Christina Rossetti: *The Face of the Deep,* London, 1892, p. 76.
[13] Christina Rossetti: *Seek and Find,* London, 1879, p. 198.
[14] *The Face of the Deep,* p. 410.
[15] *An Immurata Sister.*

project on account of her attendance on her two invalid aunts at home.[16] It was at about the same time that Christina wrote to her sister-in-law at Ventnor of the London riots caused by want and by unemployment:

> Emigration is the only adequate remedy which presents itself to my imagination: and that, of course, may leave the mother country to die of inanition a stage further on: yet no one can call upon people to starve today lest England should prove powerless to hold her own tomorrow. You see, my politics are not very intricate.[17]

In Christina's religious works, noticeably in the last, *The Face of the Deep,* there are references to the industrial and political evils of the 1880's and '90's.

2

The woman Christina had become is revealed to us in many ways—in her own letters, her poems and prose works, and in the pictures of her by her brother William and by many friends. Among these are Sir Edmund Gosse, who knew her when she was still young and saw her last in 1876; Theodore Watts-Dunton, her friend from about 1872 until her death; William Sharp and Hall Caine from about 1880; Arthur Symons and Katherine Tynan (Mrs. Hinkson) from a somewhat later date in the '80's. The impression conveyed by her manner to all of them was one of dignity, reticence, and utmost courtesy. Edmund Gosse thought her shyness amounted almost to solemnity, and though Sharp believed her perturbed by strangers, he was nevertheless struck by her quiet self-possession, her "exquisite taciturnity." In her own poem *Enrica,* a tribute to an Italian woman in England, she wrote:

> We Englishwomen, trim, correct,
> All minted in the selfsame mould,
> Warm-hearted but of semblance cold,
> All courteous out of self-respect.

[16] Mackenzie Bell: *Christina Rossetti,* p. 58.

[17] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti:* p. 152; February 16, 1886.

The courtesy, however, took on the guise of old-fashioned charm and genuine kindliness and gentleness of manner. Hall Caine's eleven-year-old sister Lily recalled her as evoking affection by her gentle ways. She gave the little girl a desk on the inside lid of which she wrote her own and Lily's names.[18] The labor-poet, Thomas Dixon, wrote to William Rossetti that if the latter liked his *Time and Tide*, he would fain send a copy to William's sister whom he had met and remembered with gratitude. "It is not the poetess, though I love her through her poetry; but it is other feelings that was made manifest to me by that Sister of yours. And her kind remembrance of that afternoon, and mention of it to me again when I met with her in London, made me feel how kind a feeling she had to one almost a stranger until a few quiet simple utterances made them friends."[19] Alexander Macmillan, the publisher, characterized her as bright and interesting.[20]

Her brother emphasizes scrupulosity as a main constituent of her character, though at the same time he speaks of her tolerance in judging others.[21] Her whole life bears testimony to how exactly she heeded her scruples with regard to pleasure and to duty; her expression of opinion was, too, always scrupulously sincere. One of her published prayers is for grace never to tamper with conscience, and another is for strict truthfulness of word and manner.[22] Mr. Sharp tells an apposite anecdote of her entire honesty with him.[23] He had sent her a volume of his poems containing *Madre Natura* in which he addresses nature as Madonna, Saviour, Redeemer: "I worship thee, who art inviolate." In acknowledging the book, she wrote (May 3, 1884):

[18] Lily Hall Caine: *A Child's Recollections of Rossetti, New Review,* September, 1894.

[19] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* pp. 86-87.

[20] *Letters of Alexander Macmillan,* p. 288.

[21] *Poetical Works: Memoir,* pp. lxvi-lxviii.

[22] Christina Rossetti: *Annus Domini,* Boston, London, 1874, p. 340, p. 76.

[23] William Sharp: "Some Reminiscences of Christina Rossetti," p. 744.

Shall I or shall I not say anything about *Madre Natura?* I daresay, without my taking the liberty of expressing myself you can (if you think it worth while) put my regret into words.

In answer to a reply from him, she continued:

Will you not, on consideration, agree with me that it is out of the question for a Christian really to believe what every Christian professes to believe, and yet to congratulate a friend on believing something contrary? On your having passed from a crude form of negation I do heartily congratulate you. And now . . . nothing but good will and the desire to do right move my pen.[24]

It is not surprising that in Swinburne's presentation copy of *Atalanta in Calydon,* she should have crossed out the words: "The supreme evil, God."[25] She took herself to task if in church her thoughts wandered from the prayer offered by the priest, not solely to mundane thoughts, but only to another prayer. But Christina had too strong a sense of humor and too keen a realization of the comfortableness or prickliness of companions not to see another side of the matter, so she cautions scrupulous Christians of the need of self-sifting lest among other evils they run the risk of figuring "in the right ridiculously. Common sense has forsaken them: and what gift or grace can quite supply the lack of common sense?"[26] She further remarks on the same subject: "Scrupulous persons,—a much tried and much trying sort of people, looked up to and looked down upon by their fellows. The main pity is that they do not amend themselves."[27] She was intensely amused at the suggestion in a review of her book, *The Face of the Deep,* that perhaps as a devout self-denial, she had forborne to make her verses as good in the executive sense as she could make them; she commented, "neither as praise nor as blame do I deserve the imputation."[28]

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] A. Symons: *Dramatis Personae,* "The Rossettis," Indianapolis, 1923, p. 128.

[26] *Time Flies,* p. 2.

[27] *Ibid.,* p. 3.

[28] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* p. 189.

That she was by no means rigorous with others is apparent in her sympathy for Gabriel; she had no reproaches for his procrastinations, his over indulgence in chloral, only affection and helpfulness. When shortly before his final illness, he was worrying over his having annoyed his father by his desultory habits of work, she compared her own need of repentance with his: "I want to assure you that however harassed by memory or by anxiety you may be, I have (more or less) heretofore gone through the same ordeal."[29] Nor was she narrow in matters of religious dogma; a strong Anglican herself, she believed in the truth implied in a phrase which she used several times—"home by different ways."

Christina was, however, most severe in self-discipline and seemed convinced of the truth of the Gospel texts which teach that only through suffering are goodness and perfection attained; the way of the Cross is the only way to God. "That which probes and sunders me," she asserts, "will never of its own proper nature slay me; for life it is, not death, that thus cleaves its way into my heart of hearts."[30] She coins the epigram:

> Stroke a flint, and there is nothing to admire;
> Strike a flint, and forthwith flash out sparks of fire.

There is, I think, no phrase which she repeats in verse and prose more often than that calling on herself "to set her face as a flint" towards the aim she has chosen. As a design for a chapel decoration she suggested this to Mr. Shields: "The floor of heartsease flowers . . . their being floor hinting how often if we offer our heart to God we must also trample earthly affection under foot."[31]

Even after she had a comfortable income, she spent nothing above what was essential on herself, and was content with few or no luxuries. She was over forty years old when she spoke of the legacy of an Indian shawl as supposedly the handsomest gift

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 103.
[30] *The Face of the Deep*, p. 37.
[31] Mackenzie Bell: *Christina Rossetti*, p. 109; 1885.

she had ever received.[32] The plainness of dress which has been remarked as a Polidori trait came to be in her own case Quaker-like simplicity or severity. Mr. Gosse regretted that

an ascetic or almost methodistical reserve caused her to clothe herself in a style, or with an absence of style, which was really distressing, her dark hair was streaked across her olive forehead, and turned up in a chignon; the high stiff dress ended in a hard collar and plain brooch.

Sometimes the brooch was replaced by a colored bow below which hung a fine-linked double gold chain. Her young family connection, Ford M. Ford (Hueffer), recalled that she affected the least picturesque of black garments for daily use, but on festive occasions would go so far as a pearl-gray watered silk.[33] When Katherine Tynan made Christina her first visit, she went expecting to worship at the feet of a poet saint. How taken aback she was when Christina entered the room wearing short serviceable skirts of an iron grey tweed and stout boots.

I should have expected to find her in trailing robes of soft, beautifully coloured material like all the writing and painting world of that day [1885]. Her dress did not at all go with her spiritual face and the heavily lidded wide apart eyes which one only finds in a highly gifted woman. The lids were certainly less of a beauty than they had been when her brother delighted to paint them. I certainly believe that she made the worst of herself, perhaps as a species of mortification. . . . she put one off sitting at her feet completely.[34]

Miss Tynan received later impressions of greater charm. Christina's own remark on her visitor was that she was an agreeable young woman enough, and deferential enough to puff her up like puff-paste.[35]

In these later years of her life, Christina had lost much but not all of the loveliness of her girlhood. Her brown hair had

[32] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* p. 37.

[33] Ford Madox Ford: *Ancient Lights,* p. 129.

[34] Katherine Tynan Hinkson: *Twenty-five Years Reminiscences,* London, 1913, pp. 158-59.

[35] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* p. 149.

grown darker, but was marked only here and there with solitary white hairs, and her face, though lined, kept much of its youthful contour. Her eyes were alert and bright, changing in color from azure grey to dark hazel. She herself jested over her tendency to grow stout. After the publication of *A Pageant and Other Poems* in 1881, Gabriel had apparently criticized the tone of the poems as of one "seated by the grave of buried hope." His sister replied: "Considering that I was 'old and cold and grey' so many years ago, it is (as you suggest) no wonder that nowadays I am 'so shrunk and sere.'—If only my figure would shrink somewhat! For a fat poetess is incongruous especially when seated by the grave of buried hope."[36]

To Miss Tynan she said that since she had written such melancholy things when she was young, she was obliged "to be unusually cheerful, not to say robust" in her old age.[37] Her serenity and cheerfulness were frequently lighted by her humor and a sort of homely commonsense. She amused her brothers in her *Pageant of the Months* by representing herself as November; October exclaims when he sees her:

> Here comes my youngest sister, looking dim
> And grim,
> With dismal ways.

There are many strokes of humor in *Time Flies*. "A square man in a round hole,—we behold him incompatible, irreconcilable, a standing incongruity." She advises him to get out if there is a lawful exit; if not—"our permanent square tenant then: what shall he do to mitigate the misfit which cannot be rectified?" Her final word on the matter is more serious: "We do not expect a caged eagle to look comfortable. We rather expect him to exhibit noble indignant aspiration and the perpetual protest of baulked latent power."[38] Later she examines the fable of the

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

[37] Katherine Tynan Hinkson: *Twenty-five Years Reminiscences*, p. 159.

[38] *Time Flies*, pp. 36-38.

fondling Donkey and the fondling Dog, and decides that a number of good kind people are very like the demonstrative Donkey: in their desire to be agreeable, they clumsily imitate their more tactful friends with the result that they jar our nerves. "Our pet nerve they grate upon: a hint as broad as a scowl suffices not to suppress them."[39] Her commonsense leads her to remind the devout that prayer might be a lazy substitute for other forms of help. This same good sense gives salt to some of her theological arguments; when her friend, the Reverend W. G. Horder, objected to a poem of hers as expressing a belief in the foreknowledge of God which left no room for free will, Christina held to her view but added—"And if one of the illogical sex may without offence argue with one of the logical, I would venture to illustrate my point by observing that my prescience that you will take all kindly does not compel you so to do."[40] One other phase of her practical sense is her attitude to the sale of her poems. She frequently mentions in her letters what she is going to receive and refers to the alluring qualities of "tin." Of a poem sent to the *Athenaeum* she remarks—"I desired acceptance, as you may surmise—cash."[41] and she was almost gleeful over being paid three guineas by *Literary Opinion* for her poem on the death of the son of the Prince of Wales.[42]

A further impression which Christina produced on her friends, perhaps particularly the young men, was that of intellectual force. This suggestion was conveyed partly by her countenance, partly by her power of clear cut, incisive speech.[43] Her brother Gabriel's assertion to Hall Caine with regard to sonnet making—that "conception, fundamental brain work" makes the differ-

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 133.

[40] Mackenzie Bell: *Christina Rossetti,* p. 98.

[41] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* p. 71.

[42] Mackenzie Bell, *Christina Rossetti,* p. 130.

[43] T. Hall Caine: *Recollections of Rossetti* (New and enlarged edition), London, 1928, pp. 112, 141.

ence in all art—should be remembered in relation to her; back of her songs and sonnets and ballads was fundamental brainwork.

The poems which Christina wrote in the years after she went to live in Torrington Square are mainly those contained in the 1881 volume, *A Pageant and Other Poems,* and in *Verses* (1893), the latter containing the religious poems previously published in the devotional prose works: *Called to be Saints, Time Flies,* and *The Face of the Deep.* It was with great pleasure that she told her brothers of Macmillan's accepting the poems of the 1881 volume without asking to see the manuscript or inquiring as to either bulk or subject. She was interested in the reviews of the volume, expressing her regret that since Mr. Gosse was off on a holiday, he could not "do" her for the *Saturday Review,* and rather wincing in prospect of Mr. Watts-Dunton's review in the *Athenaeum* and Hall Caine's in the *Academy.* Her fears were groundless: Watts-Dunton judged her supreme in ease of allegory and even Gabriel thought Hall Caine's notice good and feeling. Mr. Caine was really eulogistic; his opening sentence is: "Anything sweeter or more beautiful and at the same time more subtly conceived than the title poem of Miss Rossetti's new volume it would be difficult to desire and unfair to expect."[44] No generalization is safe as to the character of the volume, for though Christina's poetry after 1870 was mainly religious, nevertheless in this volume are her series of love sonnets, many happy nature lyrics, and several objective poems. She judged the title poem as one of the best and wholesomest pieces she had done, but the opening sonnet *The Key-Note* sounds a tone repeated in other poems of the period; regret for the songs and notes of former years, for

> Springtide and youth and useless pleasure
> And all my useless scheming,
> My hope of unattainable treasure,

[44] T. Hall Caine: *A Pageant and Other Poems, Academy,* August 27, 1881.

Dreams not worth dreaming,
Glow-worms that gleam but yield no warmth
in gleaming.

*Till Tomorrow*

Another note which gathered strength in the later religious poems is that of weariness and of desire for rest. The beautiful poem *Fluttered Wings* ends—

O fretted heart tossed to and fro,
So fain to flee, so fain to rest!
All glories that are high or low,
East or west,
Grow dim to thee who art so fain to go!

In 1890 she prepared a new and enlarged edition of her poems, a collection which was reprinted five times before her death. On Tennyson's death, she was suggested for the laureateship. When Ford Madox Ford told her that there was "a strong feeling in her favor," she shuddered; then characteristically made him narrow "the hundreds" urging her name, to nine![45]

Her books of prose after 1874 were all devotional in character and all published by the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge: *Seek and Find* (1879); *Called to be Saints* (1881); *Letter and Spirit* (1883); *Time Flies* (1885), and *The Face of the Deep* (1892). She had previously written another devotional book: *Annus Domini, a Prayer for each Day of the Year* (1874). Her artist brother raised some question as to her writing for the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge; in January, 1881, she reassured him: "I don't think harm will accrue for my S. P. C. K. books, even to my standing; if it did, I should still be glad to throw my grain of dust into the religious scale." For *Seek and Find,* she received £40, and was amused and amazed over selling the manuscript to Mr. Fairfax Murray for £10. Two prose essays also belong to these later years: *Dante: the Poet illustrated out of the Poem,* printed in the *Century,* and in *Literary Opinion* her account of *The House of Dante Gabriel*

[45] Ford Madox Ford: *Ancient Lights,* p. 55.

*Rossetti.* The quotations in the Dante article are all from Mr. Cayley's translation, which Christina loyally praises as satisfying an ear rendered fastidious by Dante's own harmony of words; "with a master hand he conveys to us the sense amid echoes of the familiar sound."[46] She never executed a proposed biography for the *Eminent Women* series, edited by Mr. J. H. Ingram. She thought it best that she should not accede to his request that she write of Adelaide Procter, for she had been only on the fringes of her circle and others were better qualified, but she confessed that she could write with enthusiasm of that great poetess and lovable woman, Mrs. Browning. Browning had to be consulted first, and possibly he was not ready for the projected book, for it was abandoned, Christina commenting, "I strongly sympathize with his reticence where one so near and dear to him is concerned."[47] She also gave up the idea of writing about Mrs. Radcliffe since she could find too little material.[48]

Miss Rossetti's own writings show that to the end of her career Dante and the Bible, with commentaries on the latter, continued to be the backbone of her reading. Her Dante essay includes a sketch of the poet's life and an excellent synopsis of the *Divine Comedy,* a synopsis economically indicative of the vivid scenes of the original. She urges the necessity of reading the *Vita Nuova* and *Il Convito* with the longer work. A humorous touch is her suggestion that in Paradise Dante encountered "jubilant souls grown loquacious." Aside from the Bible and Dante, her choice of books was normally varied, though biography and poetry are most frequently mentioned in her letters. She read and enjoyed three volumes of Marlborough Memoirs "nominally Duchess but involving much Duke"; the memoirs and letters of Sara Coleridge, the quality of whose genius is somewhat akin to Christina's own; and Madame D'Arblay's diary, which she

[46] The *Century,* February, 1884, p. 567.

[47] Mackenzie Bell: *Christina Rossetti,* p. 101.

[48] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* p. 110; pp. 126-27.

hoped Gabriel would like "in moderation" as she and her mother had done. She enjoyed more than moderately the *Autobiography* of the Tractarian poet, Isaac Williams, and also admired his poems, which were, she said, much to her taste, but she thought nothing of Keble as a poet. Apparently she did not read either Morris or Swinburne widely, but she wrote critically to Gabriel of at least two poets who had been somewhat influenced by him, Thomas Gordon Hake and Canon Richard Watson Dixon. Gabriel had sent her the two volumes of the latter's poems; she was impressed with their frequent excellence but asked—"Do you think the rock, if any, Mr. Dixon tends to split on is dryness?" Her criticism of others is similarly apposite: though she saw marked beauties in William Watson's *Prince's Quest,* she foresaw no great future for its author; Henley's *In Hospital* was "grim but interesting"; and she had praise for Mrs. Meynell and Emily Dickinson. She referred to Turguenieff as an old favorite, in particular *Le Roi Léar de la Steppe;* she discussed Leopardi and Baudelaire with Arthur Symons,[49] and read such American verse as Joaquin Miller's *Songs of the Sierras.* William Sharp tells of her enjoyment of Southwell's "Burning Babe," and of her beautiful reading of it. In *The Face of the Deep* she makes some comparison of Dante and of Milton and expresses her preference for the Italian poet. Gabriel, however, mentions her "special relish" for Milton's sonnet on Lawrence. She read some Ruskin though she disliked the Oxford Art Lectures which fell her way. Mrs. Browning she delighted to honor. When Mr. Patchett Martin in an article in *Literary Opinion* called Miss Rossetti "the greater literary artist" of the two women, Christina wrote to him: "Yet all said, I doubt whether the woman is born or for many a long day, if ever, will be born, who will balance, not to say outweigh Mrs. Browning."[50] Next

[49] A. Symons: *Dramatis Personae,* "The Rossettis," p. 128.
[50] Mackenzie Bell: *Christina Rossetti,* p. 93.

in rank among contemporary women poets she placed Augusta Webster: in a letter to Gabriel, she remarked:

I am not well versed in George Eliot as a bard, but feel inclined to rate Mrs. Webster decidedly higher. The latter, some of whose poetry I really have admired, has sent me her fresh volume; so I have duly returned mine.[51]

This exchange of volumes calls attention to a form of enforced reading to which Miss Rossetti was subjected after her reputation was established. Aspiring young writers would send their volumes to her. She had a habit of acknowledging the receipt of such volumes before she read them in order to avoid any possible occasion for adverse criticism, for of course her criticism was always honest. She congratulated young Oliver Madox Brown on the talent displayed in his *Gabriel Denver,* but regretted the character of his principal personages: "they are detestable." At times, however, she made pleasant friends through the exchange of books. Miss Tynan, having first sought an acquaintance with William Rossetti because of her admiration for Gabriel's poetry, sent William and Christina her own volume of poems and received the following gracious acknowledgment:

My dear Miss Tynan:—

I think you will forgive the delay which has preceded my grateful acknowledgment of *Louise de la Vallière* when I tell you it was occasioned by my wish to read it before writing to you. Now, having done so, I can express my sincere admiration for your poetic gift. But beyond all gifts I account *graces,* and therefore the piety of your work fills me with hopes far beyond any to be raised by music of diction. If you have honoured my form by thinking it worth imitating, much more may I your spirit.

I think you would have been charmed by our dear Gabriel had you known him. So many were charmed and so many still remember him. My brother William, I know, is sending you his photograph, and I am sending you my last little book, *Time Flies.* Please accept it as a small response to your kind overtures. I have ventured to write in it your name without the formality of "Miss," an

[51] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* p. 97.

omission I like towards myself often, so I hope you will not dislike it. Believe me to remain,

Very truly yours,

Christina G. Rossetti.[52]

When Miss Tynan called in the late summer of 1885, the house in Torrington Square seemed gloomy within and without —shabby greens in the square and "the shadow of old age and death within the house." Christina lit three or four candles and there was a handful of fire in the grate. What was, however, not gloomy was the impression the visitor received of the mother and the daughter. Mrs. Rossetti at eighty-five retained the nobility of face and expression which had always affected those who saw her, and the daughter was all devotion. When she would bend to her mother to repeat what the guest had said, "the two heads side by side were exactly as D. G. Rossetti had painted them. I remember how Mrs. Rossetti patted her daughter's hand for something I had said, murmuring 'My affectionate Christina.' "

At about this same period Christina was writing her old friend Mrs. Heimann of her mother's being able to "accomplish" a very short walk. They would stroll arm in arm, Mrs. Rossetti in the long sealskin coat which was the treasured gift of Gabriel. More often, in warm weather, they would ride in company with one or both of the aunts—none of them so well and strong as "to invite boastfulness," and Christina herself "tugging on."[53]

Other glimpses of the life of the two women together are afforded by Christina's valentines. When Mrs. Rossetti was seventy-six, she remarked that she had never received a valentine. Every year from that time until her death ten years later, Christina wrote a valentine to her. Every year, it was a surprise, for in the meantime the dear old lady had forgotten what had happened on the preceding St. Valentine's Day. The little poems pay tender and affectionate tribute to the mother's youthfulness, wisdom, worthiness to be loved.

[52] Katherine Tynan Hinkson: *Twenty-five Years Reminiscences,* p. 150.

[53] Unpublished letter.

The mother is one

> Endearing rectitude to those who watch
> The verdict of [her] face,
> Raising and making gracious those who catch
> A semblance of [her] grace.[54]

Years before, William Allingham had made the remark of Mrs. Rossetti that though she said nothing clever, it was always a pleasure to be near her,"[55] and Watts-Dunton was to say later: "It is something for a man to have lived within touch of Christina Rossetti and her mother." Perhaps the gayest and most personal of Christina's valentines is that of 1885 when she sings of how robin, wren, and sparrow with hare and rabbit on the stony hill have weathered wind and storm, and

> You and I, my Mother,
> Have lived the winter through,
> And still we play our daily parts
> And still find work to do:
> And still the cornfields flourish,
> The olive and the vine,
> And still you reign my Queen of Hearts,
> And I'm your Valentine.

On April 8 of the next year, 1886, after a six weeks' illness, the dearly loved mother died. Her funeral was held at Christ Church, Woburn Square, and she was buried in the grave of her husband and Gabriel's wife. A few days later Christina wrote her sister-in-law Lucy:

> It has become a different world since last I wrote to you. Yet I rejoice that it is I who am left in the grief of this separation, and not my dearest mother.[56]

During seven of the eight remaining years of Christina's life, she was caring for one or both of her aunts, Charlotte and Eliza Polidori. They were both confined to bed after 1887. Charlotte

[54] *Poetical Works,* pp. 391; 438.

[55] William Allingham: *A Diary,* edited by H. Allingham and D. Radford, London, 1907, p. 165.

[56] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* p. 154.

died in 1890 and Eliza in 1893, at the age of eighty-three. In the care of the two ladies Christina was assisted by Mrs. Harriet Read. The further work of the establishment was done by a cook and a housemaid.

Her mother and her aunts made Christina their chief legatee. Mrs. Rossetti and William had been joint heirs in Gabriel's estate; now Christina, inheriting her mother's property, received about £4,000. Her aunt Charlotte left to Eliza and Christina £5,000—two-thirds to the niece—and, on Eliza's death, Christina inherited £4,100.[57] She was then possessed of an independent income of over £300 a year after Mrs. Rossetti's death and had more than what sufficed for her needs in the closing years of her life. William's account of her own earnings is the following:

> I suppose that from 1854 to 1862 she seldom made £10 in a year; from 1862 to 1890 there might be (taking one year with another) an average of perhaps £40 per annum—less rather than more. By 1890 her poetic reputation was fully settled and her profits were substantial without being at all large.[58]

William records also her liberality towards him in the disposition of the legacies of kinsfolk, and in her bestowal of gifts when illness in his own household heavily increased his expenses. She was, too, a generous donor to her church and to other causes.

Shortly after the death of their mother, William entered in his diary the item that Christina had dined in his home, an event unprecedented those four years. He judged her not especially fond of children, and she thought herself deficient in the knack of making friends with little people. She was, however, much interested in William's family. There were five children, Olivia, familiarly called Olive, Helen, Arthur, and the twins, Mary and Michael. Michael died in infancy. Christina was much perturbed because he had not been baptized, and begged and gained

[57] *Ibid.*, pp. 217-18.
[58] *Poetical Works*, p. li.

her brother's permission to administer the rite before the little boy's death. After Mrs. Rossetti's death, Christina asked that her ten-year-old niece Olive should be her companion at Brighton. Olive had already written a play, *Theseus,* on which Christina now coached her. Before this she had been pleased by Olive's liking for her *Sing-Song,* and when the child, who was then only five and a half, had asked for a copy of her aunt's sonnet to her eighty-year-old grandmother, Christina had written for her the flower lyric *Golden Glories.* An amusing passage in the *Family Letters* is the aunt's comment on Olive, and William's refutation of her charge. Christina wrote of her little niece as a very nice child, independent and full of intelligence but perhaps possessed of some tendency to jealousy; the fathr's note is "I don't think Olive was at this time or has ever become, of a jealous disposition." The aunt was later much interested in "the sensible Olive's" and Arthur's success in the Oxford Examinations, and makes many references in her letters to the "studious Helen" and her pet Mary, and also to the birthdays of "the four." In 1890, William moved from his Endsleigh Garden home to 3 St. Edmund's Terrace, Regent's Park, where he lived until his death in 1919 and where his youngest daughter, Miss Mary Rossetti, now resides. His son, Arthur, went into an industrial company in Lancashire. Helen is known as Helen Angeli, the author of *Shelley in Italy,* and other works, and Olive is the Signora Agresti of Rome, who has written in both English and Italian. It is the Signora Agresti who thus describes her aunt as she remembers her:

I can see my Aunt, a little middle-aged woman in her uninteresting, unbeautiful clothes, with the unbecoming cap which Victorian England of the 50's and 60's required of the middle-aged, seated in her little parlor looking out on a dingy sooty little back-yard in Torrington Square, speaking exquisite precise English in a soft deliberate voice. Her large, rather prominent eyes betrayed the intense inner concentration which made her live and move among her surroundings almost as though extraneous to them. The poetess who shows such

intense love of nature, who writes: "Oh wind, where have you been that you blow so sweet among the violets that blossom at my feet," was rarely in the country for two or three weeks at a time, and spent practically all her life in gloomy, dingy London streets. I remember the pathetic pleasure she took in watering some tiny orange shoots that had grown from pips she planted in little pots and kept on a little balcony. She had no feeling for making a room homely or cheery or attractive, but in her surroundings was formal and neat and precise, more like a nun in her cell than a woman in her home. She loved and delighted in flowers but very rarely had any in her room and then they had been brought by some friend.

"Will anything like spring, will anything
Like summer rouse one day the slumbering sense?"

To one who knew Christina Rossetti these lines have a poignant pathos. The warm southern nature, the passionate heart, the delight in beauty, the love of forms and symbol, and rich ritual were all there, but numbed, turned inward, thwarted by an alien environment, alien to the racial inheritance; all would have thawed and expanded and fructified in the sunshine of Italy, in the warm mothering embrace of the Roman Catholic Church, but the seed was sown in the chilly north.

"Wherefore art thou strange and not my mother?
Thou hast stolen my heart and broken it,"

she exclaims in leaving Italy after the one and only three weeks which took her no further than the Lakes, not to the soft languorous loveliness of the Bay of Naples, which to her Father was his homeland.[59]

Another vivid picture of Christina by an intimate young friend is that of Ford Madox Ford (Hueffer). His mother was the daughter of Ford Madox Brown, and so was William Rossetti's sister-in-law. The son was nineteen when Christina died.

This black robed figure with the clean cut and olive-coloured features, the dark hair, the restrained and formal gestures, the hands always folded in the lap, the head always judiciously on one side, and with the clear-cut, precise enunciation, this tranquil religious was undergoing within herself always a fierce struggle between the pagan desire for life, for the light of the sun and love, and an asceticism

[59] From a letter from Signora Agresti to the author.

that, in its almost more than Calvinistic restraint, reached also to a point of frenzy. She put love from her with both hands and yearned for it unceasingly. She let life pass by and wrote of glowing tapestries, of wine and pomegranates; she was thinking always of heaths, the wide sands of the sea-shore, of south walls on which the apricots grow, and yet she lived always of her own free will in the gloom of a London Square.[60]

In the closing years of her life, Miss Rossetti's routine was a simple one: she rose early, dined at one or two, and after a third meal in the evening, retired soon after nine. Her household joined with her in family prayers in the morning and evening. Until her last illness, she was present at practically all the weekly services in her church where she sat in the front pew and was the last to leave her place.[61]

Among the friends who visited her were Mr. Sharp, Mr. Watts-Dunton, Mrs. Richard Garnett, Miss Lisa Wilson (herself a poetess), Mr. Shields, Miss Ellen Proctor, and Mr. Mackenzie Bell, the last two being her first biographers. With Swinburne she was always friendly. When he presented to her in 1882 a copy of his *Tristram of Lyonesse,* she wrote of it to William as the fourth book which he had sent her, "and I not one hitherto to him,—so for lack of aught else I am actually offering him a *Called to be Saints,* merely however drawing his attention to the verses." Later she wrote that he had acknowledged her book "with consummate graciousness" and had given her great pleasure by liking the verses for St. Barnabas, Holy Innocents, SS. Philip and James. He dedicated to her *A Century of Roundels* in 1883, and a year later in *A Midsummer Holiday and Other Poems* addressed to her *A Ballad of Appeal,* in which he praises nobly the varied notes of her songs and offers a prayer to her that once again her sheer music should break a silence worse than winter. Ten years later she sent to him a copy of her last book, *The Face of the Deep.* That he loyally read it is proven

[60] Ford Madox Ford: *Ancient Lights,* p. 60.
[61] Mackenzie Bell: *Christina Rossetti,* p. 165.

by a passage in a letter to Gosse where he asks: "Have you read her commentary on *The Apocalypse*—between 500 and 600 closely printed pages? I HAVE—from the first line to the last —and yet I live!"[62] The volume of *New Poems* of Christina's printed soon after her death was dedicated by William to Swinburne as "the generous eulogist of Christina Rossetti, who hailed his genius and prized himself."

This commentary on the *Apocalypse* had consumed three years of hard work. She returned as a donation to the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge the sum which they paid her for the book. Such was the attraction of her name that *The Face of the Deep* had to be promptly reprinted. After it was completed, she set herself the task of copying out of three of her devotional books the poems which were republished by the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge in 1893 as *Verses*. This volume was in great demand, Christina's friend, Mrs. Garnett, telling her that in one large shop twenty or thirty calls for it had been negatived for the moment.[63] By April of the following year it had passed into a third edition. Both of these tasks had been undertaken and carried to completion in the face of ill health. In 1888 she had written Miss Tynan: "Advancing age and ailing health tell upon me. I am not strong, and am more than content not to be strong." A few months afterwards she told the same correspondent that she was allowing herself to grow old.[64]

It was, indeed, before the appearance of either of those books which were to be the last she was to prepare for the press that Christina had been overtaken by the dread disease which caused

[62] Edmund Gosse and Thomas J. Wise: Editors, *Letters of Algernon C. Swinburne,* New York, London, 1919, Vol. II, p. 233. Swinburne's praise of her religious verse, *Ashley Catalogue,* London, 1928, Vol. IV, p. 145; Vol. VI, pp. 119-20; of her poetry for children, Vol. VI, p. 29, pp. 88-89.

[63] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* p. 201.

[64] Katherine Tynan Hinkson: *Christina Rossetti,* in the *Bookman:* February, 1895, pp. 28-29.

her death. On May 20, 1892, she informed her brother William that "something brooding" in her health had probably reached a point demanding sharp treatment. "And dear William," she continued, "do not worry yourself about me; you see this is not an avowed certainty as yet, and come what will I am in Better Hands than either yours or my own; I desire to realize and to rest in this."[65] Three days afterwards she wrote Lucy that she had asked the prayers of the congregation at her church, but without her name given out, as she deprecated getting into paragraphs. She was operated on for cancer on May 25 by a Dr. Lawson. She recuperated with surprising rapidity, and before the end of June was at Brighton where William joined her, his presence transforming "an enforced expedition into quite a holiday." For almost a year, she lived in comparative comfort, but by April, a few weeks before her aunt Eliza's death, she realized that the trouble was still there, and from then on, the disease gained headway in her left arm and shoulder. It was aggravated by angina pectoris and dropsy. Throughout 1893 and the early months of 1894, she was still able to leave the house, sitting for a while in the Square enclosure and attending church, and also writing letters and, for a time, verses. When Katherine Tynan visited her in the autumn of 1893 and found her on her couch, she was struck by the spiritual beauty in the invalid's face. Christina took a kindly interest in Miss Tynan's affairs, but was much relieved when she was assured that her visitor had come out of personal interest and not from the desire for an interview. "Now we can talk easily, and I shall not feel as though I were sitting to be photographed."[66] She thanked her friend for giving up the idea of writing about her: "When I am gone will be time enough."[67]

At sixteen Christina had composed verses in which she had

[65] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* pp. 185-86.

[66] Katherine Tynan Hinkson: *The Middle Years,* pp. 108-109.

[67] Katherine Tynan Hinkson: The *Bookman,* February, 1895, pp. 28-29.

praised the still peace of death. No wonder, then, that now when over sixty, she should express longing for a consummation which would end not only months of utter weariness and recurrent pain but also years of ill health, of mental conflict, of conscious separation from loved ones. The poem which her brother thought the latest written, perhaps early in 1893, is *Sleeping at Last:*

> No more a timid heart downcast or overcast,
> No more pangs that wing or shifting fears that hover,
> Sleeping at last in a dreamless sleep locked fast.
>
> Fast asleep. Singing birds in their leafy cover
> Cannot waken her, nor shake her the gusty blast.
> Under the purple thyme and the purple clover,
> Sleeping at last.

In the fall of 1893 her old friend Ford Madox Brown died, and in the following April, his daughter—William's wife, Lucy Madox Rossetti. At the time of his wife's death, William and his family were with her in San Remo, the family having been in Italy for several months. After his return, he was frequently with his sister and has published the extracts from his diary which record the closing months of her life. These and her letters tell a story not all unhappy. One day she received a call from Mary Cayley and her brother Henry, the son and daughter of Charles's brother, whose wife sent her daffodils; on another day her own nieces sent flowers. She heard of the performance of her *Pageant* in the little town of Chesham, and was interested in William's preparation of his memoirs of Gabriel. And always there were William's visits. Some years before, she had written his wife, "I had been secretly hoping I might see William yesterday and he came." They talked together of old matters, her memory "being singularly prompt and clear," so that she could set him right as to details of their former family life, and they recalled half-forgotten nonsense rhymes which she had composed when a girl. She committed to his care her pet cat, Muff, and

made him her sole legatee after having provided for some £2,000 in charitable bequests. Her mind turned to her friend and lover, and she spoke of Cayley in terms of passionate intensity. Her brother was distressed that her religion did not bring her more peace at the least. Their sister Maria had been happy in the unshaken belief that she was entering into another life of joy unspeakable, but Christina was to the end too humble, too convinced of her own shortcomings, to be certain of that happiness which her faith assured her awaited the children of God.

Early Saturday morning, December 29, in the month of her sixty-fourth birthday, she died, her nurse and companion Harriet Read being with her at the end. The funeral took place on the following Wednesday. Snow had fallen on the two previous nights, but the day was bright and sunny. The notice in the *Athenaeum* of January 5 is brief but practically sufficient:

> Miss Christina Rossetti was interred on Wednesday last at the Highgate Cemetery. The first part of the burial service took place at Christ Church, Woburn Square, where before a large and distinguished congregation, was sung after the lesson the poet's own well known hymn, "The Porter watches at the gate," and after the prayers her hymn, "Lord, grant us grace to mount by steps of grace." The music was by Mr. Frank T. Lowden, organist of Christ Church. The Rev. J. J. Glendenning Nash, incumbent of the church, officiated. The mourners were her brother, Mr. William R. Rossetti, his four children (the Misses Olivia, Mary, and Helen, and Mr. Arthur Rossetti), Mr. Theodore Watts, the Countess Hugo, Mrs. Read, and Miss Wilson.

In the church was present one of the old Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of Christina's girlhood, Frederick George Stephens, with his wife, and there, too, were her artist friends Arthur Hughes and Frederic Shields, besides her appreciative critic William Sharp.

On the following Sunday Mr. Nash preached a memorial sermon on the text from Proverbs: "Her own works praise her"; and among many published tributes were poems by Watts-Dun-

ton—*The Two Christmastides*[68]—and by Swinburne—*A New Year's Eve.*[69]

In Highgate Cemetery her name with the dates of her birth and death were added to those of her parents and Gabriel's wife, with the inscription from the *Purgatorio:*

*Volsersi a me con salutevol cenno*
(They turned to me with an act of salutation.)

Then followed her own lines:

Give me the lowest place: or if for me
That lowest place too high, make one more low
Where I may sit and see
My God and love Thee so.

In Christ Church, there is a silver communion service set with the names of Mrs. Rossetti, the Misses Polidori, and Christina. There, too, is a memorial window, a reredos series of paintings representing Christ instituting the Eucharist. It was dedicated on All Saints' Day, 1898, by the Right Reverend B. F. Westcott, Bishop of Durham. Beneath it is the inscription:

The above paintings,
Designed by Sir E. Burne-Jones, Bart.
Are dedicated to the glory of God
and in loving memory of
Christina Georgina Rossetti
who worshipped in this church
and fell asleep in Jesus
December 29, 1894.
"Give me the lowest place."

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[68] The *Athenaeum,* January 12, 1895, pp. 48-49.
[69] *Nineteenth Century,* February, 1895, pp. 367-68.

## Chapter VII

## THE ART OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

### 1

The first question which arises in considering the art of Christina Rossetti concerns her personal reaction to her creative power and performance: How did she work? What did she think of her art? A partial answer to the questions is found in her own utterances, especially in her letters, and in the letters and reminiscences of her friends and relatives.

During one of their few periods of separation, Mrs. Rossetti wrote Christina: "Gabriel says that you are a more spontaneous poet than he." No one has ever doubted the correctness of his remark. William Michael,[1] however, has given details regarding the matter as drawn from his observation:

> Christina's habits of composing were eminently of the spontaneous kind. I question her having ever once deliberated with herself whether or not she would write something or other, and then, after thinking out a subject, having proceeded to treat it in regular spells of work. Instead of this, something impelled her feelings, or "came into her head," and her hand obeyed the dictation.

Although she was constantly in the house with William for over forty years, he never saw her in the act of composition except when they were occupied in the game of making *bouts-rimés* sonnets. Ford Madox Ford is under the impression that she did her actual writing in her bedroom on the corner of the washstand.

What she herself has to say about her method of composition is, of course, still more to the purpose. She is not one of the

[1] *New Poems by Christina Rossetti:* Preface xiii.

many lyric poets who have written poems about their own poetry. Devotional as she was, she wrote no poem dedicating her verse to the expression of her love for Christ as Herbert did; nor like Emily Brontë has she told of how imagination might possess her in solitude when the house was dark and still. She has not described in verse the mood or dominating spirit of her poetry as Alice Meynell did in her *Poet of One Mood.* Perhaps Christina was too lacking in self-consciousness about her songs to sing about them and of how they came to be. Here and there, however, is her own testimony as to her process of creation. When she was selecting poems for her *Pageant* volume, she wrote to Gabriel of one piece which she called a favorite of her own and challenged him to unearth one to eclipse it, for, she continued, "if I remember the mood in which I wrote it, it is something of a geninue 'lyric cry,' and such I will back against all skilled labour."[2] In corresponding with Mr. Horder about her little prose work, *Time Flies*, she assured him that no one would be more pleased than herself if she could always write poems. "But just because poetry *is* a gift, I scarcely dare to follow your allusion to prophets in company with poets—I am not surprised to find myself unable to summon it at will and use it according to my own choice."[3] Elsewhere she tells the story of her difficulty in releasing from the laboratory the Alchemist of *The Prince's Progress;* he was not just what she had pictured he would be, "but," she says to Gabriel, "thus he came and thus he must stay! You know my system of work." Charlotte Brontë wrote in this same strain to Mr. Lewes of the artist's yielding to an overmastering creative impulse or mood, which will have its own way until it vanishes for a time and leaves the author sterile until it revisits him.

Apparently it was in these periods of creative sterility that Christina turned to prose. Her strong sense of duty led her to

[2] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* p. 65.

[3] Mackenzie Bell: *Christina Rossetti,* p. 98.

advise the readers of *Time Flies* that if at a given moment they ought to write, they should not delay because of their inability to summon up anything original, or striking, or picturesque, or eloquent, or brilliant. Her own following of this counsel did not, perhaps, have wholly happy results. The readers of her prose tales agree with her poet brother who told her that though he liked her volume, *Commonplace and Other Short Stories,* yet of course he thought her proper business was to write poetry and not *Commonplaces.*

Christina was slow to acknowledge that inspiration came from immediate surroundings or that the term inspiration was properly applicable to most poetry. William Sharp tells of how on his first meeting with Miss Rossetti, a socially conscious lady was vehemently arguing that no one could live a happy life without at least a brief sojourn in the country every year. Christina interrupted the speaker with rippling laughter, and then good-humoredly objected to her friend's theory. But the lady persisted:

Do you not find best inspiration in the country?

I? Oh dear, no! I know it *ought* to be so. But I don't derive my inspiration, as you call it—though if you will allow me to say so, I think the word quite inapposite, and to be used of very few, and then only in a most literal and sacred sense,—I don't derive anything from the country at first hand! Why, my knowledge of what is called nature is that of the town sparrow, or, at most, that of the pigeon which makes an excursion occasionally from its home in Regent's Park or Kensington Gardens. And what is more, I am fairly sure that I am in the place that best suits me. After all, we may enjoy the magic and mystery of ocean without ever adventuring upon it, and I and thousands of other Londoners . . . are in the position of those who love the sea, and understand, too, in a way its beauty and wonder, even though we reside in White Chapel or Bloomsbury.[4]

Other imaginative persons have similarly testified that they may not have seen moor or sea, yet know "how the heather looks, and what a wave must be." When her friends deplored her Blooms-

[4] William Sharp: "Some Reminiscences of Christina Rossetti."

bury surroundings, Christina disclaimed the need of happier environment: "I am of those who think with Bacon that the Souls of the Living are the Beauty of the World."[5]

Though Christina knew that she was dowered with the gift of poetry, she was quick to realize her limitations. She is said to have been as lacking in self-criticism as some great but overserious poets have been, yet she was wise enough to be often humorous on the subject of her own work. She was, too, independent in her judgment. She by no means always followed Gabriel's advice. Though both of her brothers deeply admired her poetry, they were candid critics. Early in her poetic career, her older brother wished that she would not confine her work so largely to dreamings. After the success of *Goblin Market*, he urged her to prepare a second volume. She hesitated to do so, for she desired to wait until she had a sufficiency of quality as well as quantity; she would not be scared into premature publicity by the fear that she might delay so long that her things should become "remains." Several months later, she wrote Gabriel that she had about one hundred and twenty pages of altogether unexceptionable poetry, but she warned him: "Amongst your ousted I recognize several of my own favorites, which perhaps I may adroitly re-insert when publishing-day comes round." She was relieved when this second volume was ready for the press and hoped that people would respect her nerves and not hint for a long, long while at the possibility of a third volume. She must let her poor brain lie fallow and take its ease if she were to keep up to her mark. A few years later the request did come that she write some more poems, poems which should partake in a greater or less degree of "politics or philanthropy." Her answer was characteristically humorous and decided:

It is impossible to go on singing out loud to one's one-stringed lyre. It is not in me, and therefore it will never come out of me, to turn to politics or philanthropy with Mrs. Browning; such many-sidedness

[5] *Ibid.*

I leave to a greater than I, and having said my say, may well sit silent. "Give me the withered leaves I chose" may include the dog-eared leaves of one's first, last, and only book. If ever the fire re-kindles availably, *tanto meglio per me;* at the most I suppose a few posthumous groans may be found amongst my remains.[6]

She more than once adopted Gabriel's nickname for her poems —*groans,* yet when he consulted with her about the publication of his wife's "remains," she advised against a production *en masse* of poems so excessively sad, her own bogieism being in comparison jovial. She herself referred to *The Three Nuns* as her "dreary poem" though she advanced in its favor that it had unity of purpose.

William Michael has stated that she consulted nobody and solicited no advice, except that in the case of her first two volumes, Gabriel volunteered to point out what poems should be inserted, what withheld. Her letters show that usually she yielded to his judgment, yet not until her own agreed with it. Sometimes she died hard; at other times she persisted in her own opinion. When she arranged a new edition of her two volumes, *Goblin Market* and *The Prince's Progress* in 1875, she at first defended her inclusion of *The Lowest Room,* which had been composed as early as 1856. Gabriel criticized it as being marked by what he described as " a real taint, to some extent, of modern vicious style, derived from that same source [Mrs. Browning] . . . what might be called a falsetto muscularity." Christina took occasion to comment interestingly: "The whole subject of youthful poems grows anxious in middle age, or may at some moments appear so; one is so different yet so vividly the same." Later she confessed to an "impervious density" to his objections and acknowledged that she regretted her insertion of the poem. "Bulk was a seductive element." Nevertheless she maintained that she still did not dislike it, and with correct judgment, she retained it in subsequent editions. Again her brother

[6] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* p. 31.

suggested that she might do something to make *From House to Home* less like *The Palace of Art*. She made no change in that direction. In fact, William Michael thought that almost the only instance in which she wrote anything to meet directly the views of another person was her acceptance of Gabriel's suggestion that she expand the dirge, "Too late for love, too late for joy," into a narrative poem; the result was *The Prince's Progress*. It may be that her reluctance to seek advice and to revise was due in part to her scrupulousness in avoiding any suspicion of dishonesty in the use of anyone else's work, and due furthermore to her belief in the rightfulness of the first intention of a poem.

Her independence of judgment did not arise from any undervaluing of her brother's power. She told him that he must not expect her to possess a tithe of his capacities, and Sir Edmund Gosse[7] records that when he praised her sonnets, she said with sincerity and conviction that they could be admired only before Gabriel by printing his in the *Fortnightly Review* had showed the source of their inspiration. She must have been mistaken in this belief, for there is little relation between her sonnets and her brother's. She held her reputation as nothing compared with that of her brother, whose genius she thought was to carry on the family name.[8] It is Mr. Watts-Dunton who especially comments on her lack of self-criticism in the anecdote which has been often repeated of her selecting for the *Athenaeum* several obviously inferior poems.[9]

The spontaneity of Christina Rossetti as a poet was united, however, with the artist's painstaking search for perfection. She is quoted as having said that she set the essence of poetry above the form, for poetic spirit could exist without the form, whereas the form was an impossibility without the spirit, of which it was the lovely body.[10] To insure this loveliness of body, William

[7] Edmund Gosse: *Critical Kit-Kats:* "Christina Rossetti," p. 154.

[8] T. Hall Caine: *Recollections,* p. 242, 1928 ed.

[9] Theodore Watts-Dunton: *Old Familiar Faces,* p. 190.

[10] William Sharp: "Some Reminiscences of Christina Rossetti," p. 744.

was certain that after she had scribbled off her verses rapidly, she then took whatever pains she deemed requisite for perfecting form and phrasing. Her sureness in the choice of the right word must often have been the result of deliberation. From the date of her first verses, April 27, 1842, until June 11, 1866, which was approximately the time of the printing of her second volume, her poems were copied into little notebooks of which seventeen fell into her brother's hands. At first Maria did this transcription for her: a few times when Christina was ill, the handwriting is that of her mother, but after November 17, 1847, the handwriting is her own—the clear, regular writing reproduced in facsimile in her brother's volume of *Reminiscences* and in Mackenzie Bell's biography. When once she had selected material from these books for publication, she took every care that it should be accurately printed. She was at Hastings during one of her periods of illness and convalescence when *The Prince's Progress* was going through the press: she asked that Gabriel read the proofs before she did; then after having herself read them, she would send them home for lynx-eyed research. The facsimile proof of *Faint, Yet Pursuing* as given by Mr. Bell bears witness to her accurate correction and to her care for the marginal indentation of the lines, what she referred to as "the inning and outing" of the pieces. She expressed her dismay at the presence of a *thereof* on the title-page of her storybook, *Speaking Likenesses,* and having sent Anne Gilchrist a copy of her second volume of verse, she wrote her thanks for Mrs. Gilchrist's welcome of the book:

> *Songs in a Cornfield* seems one of the most successful pieces in the volume, and somewhat disappointingly I must ask you to correct a mispunctuation in it (p. 71). There should be no stop whatever after *coil* ("The green snake hid his coil"), but a colon after *thickset* in the next line.

To her brother William she wailed that the worst misprint of all in the book had been uncorrected.

The title poem of that second volume, *The Prince's Progress*, was the subject of a more detailed discussion with Gabriel than any other of her poems; and this discussion gives some insight into her system of work when it was not dominantly spontaneous. Gabriel had suggested the expanded form of this poem, and apparently in its composition, Christina was working under a certain amount of pressure, for she writes to him in March, 1864,

> Do you know, I seriously question whether I possess the working power with which you credit me; and whether all the painstaking at my command would result in work better than, in fact half as good as—what I have actually done on the other system?

On December 23, she first mentions the poem as under way. She is going to send her brother the first part relating to the Prince, but the Alchemist is still shivering in the blank of mere possibility. Three weeks later, he is still making himself scarce, but by January 30, he is sent to Gabriel reeking from the crucible. In a later letter she defends the metric jolt of the Alchemist passage, and refuses to introduce into the poem a tournament, which her brother had apparently suggested. She is ignorant of the procedure of tournaments and furthermore will not court comparison with Tennyson. She then explains what she calls the artistic congruity of the completed poem, *The Prince's Progress*. In March she immolated "a pipe" obnoxious to Gabriel but will retain the passage "Now the moon's at full" as happily suggestive of the Prince's character.[11] Beautiful as the poem is in its present form, Christina was right when she said that it lacked "the special felicity" of *Goblin Market*—a poem which, if we trust Shelley's testimony as to his experience, could not have been the result of labor and study or determination of will, but rather the record of one of the happiest moments of a mind capable of great happiness.

[11] *Rossetti Papers*, 1862-70, pp. 75-93.

2

The publication in 1862 of *Goblin Market and Other Poems* was an event in the story of fashion in English poetry. Christina Rossetti may not have influenced others to imitation or changed popular poetic taste, but nevertheless the characteristic poems in this first volume of hers anticipated the breaking away from the decorative verse of Tennyson and the fluent, ornate, or sentimental style of his imitators, and the achievement of a poetic manner distinguished for simplicity of diction, concentration, and restraint in expression. The tribute of earliness has been paid to Jane Austen because of her choice of material and phraseology; a similar tribute is due Christina Rossetti with regard to poetic style. The traits of the first volume marked her work until its close in the last decade of the century.

Christina was intensely sincere in what she had to say, and furthermore was, as already suggested, singularly lacking in self-consciousness about it. She writes, therefore, in one of the least labored, least precious of styles, and rarely departs from a diction of exquisite simplicity. Monosyllables serve her for building forthright phrases which give the sense of imaginative poetry. *Up-Hill* is a case in point, and the opening lines of the first sonnet of *Monna Innominata* are representative of the diction of the series:

> Come back to me, who wait and watch for you:—
> Or come not yet, for it is over then,
> And long it is before you come again,
> So far between my pleasures are and few.

There are many echoes in her poetry of the language of the King James Bible, her own attendant phrases being scarcely distinguishable in style from the Biblical quotation. Traditional turns of expression fall into place in her work so that her ballad imitations are right in diction, and the cry of the goblin men, "Come buy our fruits, come buy" belongs in her poem as well as in the *Cryes of London* and the song of Autolycus. At times she

uses the homeliest speech: a goblin "lugs a golden dish," and the Alchemist of her romantic allegory "stiff he stood as a stiff-necked mule." Such a stanza as the following from *A Green Cornfield* conforms to the theories of the *Lyrical Ballads:*

> And as I paused to hear his song,
> While swift the sunny moments slid,
> Perhaps his mate sat listening long
> And listened longer than I did.

The simplicity of Christina's style becomes in a few instances the quaintness of seventeenth-century religious verse. In *Young Death,* she writes of a scene in heaven:

> Lo in the room, the upper,
> She shall sit down to supper,
> New-bathed from head to feet
> And on Christ gazing:
> Her mouth kept clean and sweet,
> Shall laugh and sing, God praising.

Christina's tendency to employ the monosyllabic or the familiar word was very different from her brother's practice of culling impressive words of Latin origin. She is like him, however, in a fondness for words naming strong or radiant colors, and so enjoys the color and luminousness of jewels. At times her epithets are as carefully composed as his, for example: "the sun-burying west," "wild free-born cranberries," "bright-fire-like barberries"; the dim moon gleams through "the attendant night";

> Precursive flush of morning climbs
> And air vibrates with coming chimes.

Gabriel might have painted the picture suggested by the line:

> And stayed a white embroidering hand.

Far more frequent and characteristic are such unstudied phrases as "slow dark hours," "bleak mid-winter," "shady cypress tree."

The imagery of Christina's style is dominantly a matter of symbol and allegory which might better be considered in relation to subject matter. There are, however, some recurrent images which indicate the habitual direction of her thought.

Many are from the Bible: the end of pleasure is the breaking of goblets, the spilling of pleasant wine; love must build its house on a rock and not on sands. The experiences and phenomena of man's life are described in the terms belonging to the process of growth and decay in nature—the succession of the seasons, the change of bud to blossom, of blossom to fruit, or to faded flower. The discipline of life becomes the pruning of the gardener, the probing of the surgeon's knife, the action of the carver's tool, or the stress of the moulder. She thinks with relief of swerving no more beneath the knife when all the overwork of life is done, and speaks in a mood of remorseful introspection of "Self stabbing self with keen lack-pity knife." Everywhere, however, nature supplies sense impressions for idea and emotion, and these are often pleasant and altogether lovely.

Though Christina's poems are in the main lyrics, yet there are allegorical narratives of some length, noticeably *Goblin Market* and *The Prince's Progress,* ballads, and a few idyls of the Tennysonian variety. Among the ballads, *Sister Maude* and *The Noble Sisters* use the ballad theme of the cruel sister, and others (elsewhere mentioned), supernatural motives. *The Noble Sisters* is written in a twelve-line stanza of three ballad measures. The author avoids archaisms and makes no pretense of close imitation, but the two poems mentioned are like the folk ballad in tone and compression, and rank high among the many ballads of the third quarter of the past century. To be classed as idyls are *Annie, Cousin Kate, Margery, Last Night, A Farm Walk, Maggie a Lady, Brandons Both,* and perhaps *Jessie Cameron.* They are neither so interesting nor so poetic as the best of the ballads and are to be paralleled not only in Tennyson but also in Dora Greenwell, Jean Ingelow, and others—Miss Ingelow being more successful in the *genre* than Miss Rossetti, who after all could have little first-hand knowledge of rural love affairs. The latter differs, however, from both Tennyson and Jean Ingelow in greater brevity and plainness of style.

*The Noble Sisters* tells its story by means of dialogue, and the dialogue form is characteristic of many of Christina's poems. It helps to give concentration and dramatic force in poems of such varying quality and melody as *Up-Hill, The Three Enemies, Passing Away,* and this striking verse from the *Songs for Strangers and Pilgrims:*

Laughing Life cries at the feast,—
  Craving Death cries at the door,—
"Fish or fowl or fatted beast?"
  "Come with me, thy feast is o'er."—
"Wreathe the violets,"—"Watch them fade."—
  "I am sunshine."—"I am shade:
I am the sun-burying west."—
  "I am pleasure."—"I am rest:
Come with me, for I am best."

Christina was ambitious to write a great hymn. This she did not do: perhaps her religious emotions were too subtle, her metrical and rhyme patterns not simple enough for congregational response. Nevertheless more than one of her religious poems has been set to music for church singing and her carols are altogether charming. The editors[12] of the *Oxford Book of Carols* have distinguished carols from other forms of religious or folk poetry as "songs with a religious impulse that are simple, hilarious, popular, and modern" (that is, true to the period in which they are written). Sometimes conceits detract from their simplicity, and ecclesiastical lugubriousness from their jollity, but in general a carol "dances because it is so Christian," echoing the gaiety of St. Francis, the troubadour of God, or St. Paul's conception that the fruits of the spirit are love and joy. Of the songs which Christina Rossetti wrote for Christmas more than one have the authentic notes of childlike simplicity and directness, happiness of mood, and poetic melody of such a kind that they may be sung to jubilant tunes.

[12] Percy Dearmer, R. Vaughan Williams, Martin Shaw: *Oxford Book of Carols,* Oxford, 1928, pp. v, vi.

Two poetic forms far more closely associated with Christina Rossetti's name than ballad, idyl, or carol are the roundel and the sonnet. In 1881, Swinburne published *A Century of Roundels* dedicated to his old friend Christina Rossetti. He was fearful lest songs light as his should not please "ears tuned to strains of loftier thought." That his fears were unfounded is indicated by the fact that Christina adopted the roundel and used it for over forty poems. Swinburne had departed from the requirements of the older conventional rondeau, and confined his roundels to eleven lines with only two rhymes, the meter not being fixed. It is this form which Miss Rossetti used. In her early years before she was herself asking where were the songs that she used to sing, she would hardly have used a form so artificial and so likely to lead to obscurity. Swinburne had used the form especially for poems on childhood; Christina turned it to religion. The tenderness of note in the following roundel is probably due in part to the association suggested by the subtitle, *A Song for All the Maries,* the mother and sister of the singer both being Maries. Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" speak:

Our Master lies asleep and is at rest:
  His heart has ceased to bleed, His eye to weep:
The sun ashamed has dropt down in the west:
  Our Master lies asleep.

  Now we are they who weep, and trembling keep
Vigil, with wrung heart in a sighing breast,
  While slow time creeps, and slow the shadows creep.

Renew Thy youth, as eagle from the nest;
  O Master, who has sown, arise to reap:—
No cock-crow yet, no flush on eastern crest:
  Our Master lies asleep.

Christina wrote sonnets from the beginning of her poetic career until the two closing years of her life. They stand as individual poems, or in groups of two or four, and include two

series: *Monna Innominata* of fourteen, and *Later Life* of twenty-eight sonnets. Though some of them are intensely personal, many fine ones are objective in theme. With few exceptions, Christina used the octave and sestet division of the Petrarchan sonnet, exercising a good deal of freedom in the rhyme scheme of the sestet. Her tendency to irregularity in verse form received wholesome check in the bonds of restraint which have proven a challenge to our greatest poets; she, however, did not need the sonnet's scanty plot of ground as compelling economy. She made so familiar a practice of husbanding her resources that when she does it in the sonnet, her naturalness of style never gives the reader the impression that thought or mood is forced into a mould. The wholly appropriate cadence of the sonnet *Remember* arises from no artifice; the word order is that of good prose. An interesting glimpse into her workshop is that afforded by the *bouts-rimés* sonnets of the collected poetical works: the youthful exercises which she wrote to rhymes furnished by her brothers and which show that she gained mastery through experimentation.

Her longer poems and other lyrics besides the sonnets prove the truth of Mr. Elton's judgment of Christina Rossetti as "one of the safest artists among the English poets."[13] They also illustrate at times her lack of conventionality and her audacity—qualities which appear both in the fortunate and also in the less happy irregularities of her verse. When she received from America the poems of Emily Dickinson, she wrote in a letter to her brother William:[14] "She *had* (for she is dead) a wonderfully Blakean gift, but therewithal a startling recklessness of poetic ways and means." It is curious that John Ruskin wrote in much the same terms of her own poetry. Gabriel had sent *Goblin Market* and a group of other poems to him to enlist his cham-

[13] Oliver Elton: *A Survey of English Literature, 1780-1880,* London, 1920, Vol. IV, p. 22.

[14] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* pp. 176-77.

pionship in the shape of an article in the *Cornhill* when the poems appeared in print. Ruskin replied (c. 20 January, 1861):

I sat up till late last night reading poems. They are full of beauty and power. But no publisher—I am deeply grieved to know this—would take them, so full are they of quaintnesses and offenses. Irregular measure (introduced to my great regret, in its chief wilfulness, by Coleridge) is the calamity of modern poetry. The *Iliad*, the *Divina Commedia*, the *Aeneid*, the whole of Spenser, Milton, Keats, are written without taking a single license or violating the common ear for metre; your sister should exercise herself in the severest commonplaces of metre until she can write as the public like. Then if she puts in her observation and passion all will become precious. But she must have the Form first.[15]

When *Goblin Market and Other Poems* were actually published, Ruskin pronounced them "very, very beautiful."[16] Even if he had not retracted, he should not be judged wholly wrong, erratic as he often was, for though Christina Rossetti's workmanship is usually exquisite, she is at times reckless. In spite of her Italian ear for harmony, licenses in rhyme occur: *faint* and *bent; runs, once, ones, reunions; head* and *made; canvases* and *loveliness; clematis* and *perfume is.* Sometimes verses lack melody when the emotion requires it; for example, *One Day:*

> I will tell you when they parted;
> When plenteous Autumn sheaves were brown
> Then they parted heavy-hearted;
> The full rejoicing sun looked down
> As grand as in the days before;
> Only they had lost a crown;
> Only to them those days of yore
> Could come back nevermore.

At other times, the measure is hardly appropriate to mood or thought. *Introspective*[17] is one of the most rigorous and despair-

[15] W. M. Rossetti: *Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism*, pp. 258-59.

[16] E. T. Cook: *Life of John Ruskin*, Vol. II, p. 500.

[17] She herself did not publish this, but it has come to be something of a favorite.

ing of her poems, yet it is difficult not to read some stanzas "trippingly on the tongue."

The "irregular measure" which Ruskin censured as calamitous frequently occurs, but is commonly used with the sureness of the artist and adds to the impression of spontaneity which is one of the most charming qualities of Miss Rossetti's verse. The short two to four syllable lines of *All Saints* vary constantly in measure, but are altogether successful in leading us to see as well as hear an innumerable throng mounting upward "with praise in mouth." She is, too, prone to vary the number of lines in the stanzas of a given poem, the variations not falling into any arrangement of "regular irregularities." *Goblin Market* is written in such stanzas of varying length and metre, the verses held together by rhyme employed in accordance with no perceptible plan other than the purpose of affording pleasure and a sense of melodic unity. The stanzas of the lyrical narrative *Maiden-Song* are nine, eleven, thirteen, or fifteen lines long, but the concluding lines of every one of the twenty-one stanzas rhyme with the opening line of the poem: "Long ago and long ago." Many of the religious poems are written in apparently irregular stanzas and in a multiplicity of forms, a practise followed by the religious poets of the seventeenth century—Herbert, Vaughan, Traherne.

These irregularities, however, by no means arise from any difficulty in rhyming. Christina had astonishing facility in rhyme and employed a diversity of stanzas of fixed rhyme patterns. She uses couplets and triplets throughout her poems, and in at least three instances employs *terza rima: By the Waters of Babylon, A Martyr, You are Come into Zion.* There is the solemnity of monorhyme in *Hope is counterpoise of fear, Can I know it? Nay,* the beautiful *Marvel of Marvels,* and *Passing Away,* where the repeated sound has the effect of the chimes of New Year's Eve. In *Sound Asleep* the monorhyme is confined to each stanza. The six lines of the *Prince's Progress* stanza and

the five of that of the *Old World Thicket* have only two end-sounds. Especially interesting are the effects of repetition and rhyme in *Today for Me* and *Babylon*. Christina uses, too, a good deal of internal rhyme, or she stresses a rhyme word by repeating it in the following verses.

> The hope I dreamed of was a dream,
> Was but a dream; and now I wake,
> Exceeding comfortless, and worn, and old,
> For a dream's sake.
>
> *Mirage*

Occasionally a sort of echo rhyme binds one verse or division of a poem with another. The sad little poem of pity for Christ's followers in the hours after the Crucifixion gives us a feeling of their helplessness through the iteration of the verse:

> There is nothing more that they can do.

Christina gains somewhat unusual effects in many poems by the repetition of phrases; sometimes, unexpected abruptness—

> Man's life is but a working day
> Whose tasks are set aright:
> A time to work, a time to pray,
> And then a quiet night.
> And then, please God, a quiet night;

at other times, the strength of epigram: "Love pardons the unpardonable past."

A striking and characterizing trait of Christina's stanza form is her habit of closing the stanza with a short line of one or two accents. *Mirage* (quoted above), *The Prince's Progress, Sleeping at Last* are examples among many. The third of these poems is also an illustration of a circumstance which Madame Cazamian[18] has remarked—how often a poem has seemed to evolve out of a phrase. The contrast between *remember* and *forget* must have had a share in the making of three of her loveliest

[18] Madeleine Cazamian: *Christina Rossetti, Revue de Paris,* August, 1911, Vol. IV, p. 578.

lyrics. In this instance, Swinburne paid her the tribute of borrowing. She had written—

> And if thou wilt, remember;
> And if thou wilt, forget,

before he rang the changes on it in a poem of more intricate structure than hers, *Rococo:*

> Forget that I remember
> And dream that I forget.

It may be, too, that when Swinburne wrote that most musical of poems, the *Garden of Proserpine,* his memory was haunted not only by the usage of elder poets but also by the mood and the cadence of *Dream Land* and *Sleep at Sea.* He and Christina shared, too, a liking for anapaestic verse. Pleasing examples of her use of it are the short poems: *Tempest and Terror Below* and *How Know I That It Looms Lovely That Land I Have Never Seen.*

The poem of hers which Christina read aloud to William Sharp when he was calling on her illustrates many of the elements of her technic.[19] Mr. Sharp recollected that as she read, each word was separate and distinct and that she repeated the first line of the second stanza:

> Heaven's chimes are slow, but sure to strike at last:
> Earth's sands are slow, but surely dropping thro':
> And much we have to suffer, much to do,
> Before the time be past.
>
> Chimes that keep time are neither slow nor fast:
> Not many are the numbered sands nor few:
> A time to suffer, and a time to do,
> And then the time is past.

[19] William Sharp: "Some Reminiscences of Christina Rossetti," pp. 736-49.

## Chapter VIII

## THE UNAPPARENT WORLD

### 1

### Vision, Symbol, Allegory

In her very early work, Christina Rossetti emerges as one of the band of poets who journey not as strangers and pilgrims in the land of vision, but who walk there as in their native country and their own natural homes which they may enter as rightful heirs and lords. She was at home in a dream world when at sixteen she wrote *The Dead City*. She reached the splendid silent streets of the city only after having wandered through the mazes of a solitary wood where the living green had been blighted and she must go on as in a dream with solid darkness overhead and unseen ground beneath. Slightly later she published in the *Germ* two poems of the unseen world: *An End* and *Dreamland*. In the first she sings of how Love is dead and how the mourners sit by his grave in the quiet evening hours; their eyes are shadow-veiled and they sing to few chords, sad and low. The second poem pictures dreamland as a shadowy resting-place where sunless rivers bear onward a sleeper, who lies forgetful of all earthly sights and sounds.

In both these poems as well as in the *Verses* of 1847 there is allegory and symbol. Though symbol may be the soul of all poetry, yet the visionary in particular realizes moral or spiritual truths or mystic experience which he can convey to others only by the vehicle of story and symbol. In recent poetry not only has the term symbol stood for "something manifesting to human

sense a non-sensuous reality,"[1] but it has had also a slightly different signification as an image or succession of images immediately created by the poet's mood, which at once conveys that mood to the reader without explanation and solely by the power of suggestion. Christina Rossetti employs symbols for both purposes. More than one of her lyrics merely puts before us a succession of images with no account of the emotion as such; *My Birthday* thus expresses rapture, and the sonnet *Cobwebs,* the contrary mood of utter indifference and deadness to all sensation. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's short poems *The Honeysuckle* and *The Woodspurge* are symbolic in the same sense. Usually, however, Christina speaks in symbols which present what are to her the truths of the transcendental world, and a discussion of her use of symbol and allegory becomes merged in a consideration of her poems of the supernatural. Not all of her allegories are touched by the supernatural nor are all her dream poems allegorical, but the greater number of her poems of fancy and vision are strengthened in meaning by a suggestion that something is meant through and beyond what is actually presented. The allegory, however, may be allowed to sleep for the reader of non-allegorizing turn of mind.

Christina must by nature have liked to perceive many meanings in one figure. The symbolic devices which she drew for her early verses have already been noted. One of these poems, *The Solitary Rose,* composed when she was only sixteen, describes a single red rose, but it also suggests that happiness may arise from the security of solitude. A study of the biblical material in her works reveals that she was keenly interested in some of the books of Scripture which are especially full of symbol. The most frequently used source of New Testament texts in her book of prayers, *Annus Domini,* is the Book of the Revelation of St. John, and the longest and most ambitious of her prose works,

[1] Sheila Kaye-Smith: *Anglo-Catholicism,* p. 207.

*The Face of the Deep*, is a comment on the apocalyptic vision. *The Song of Solomon* with its rich oriental imagery and Isaiah with its prophetic visions rank after the Psalms in the Old Testament as supplying the texts for her prayers, and especially does the first furnish conventional symbols in her religious poetry. She writes often of harp and crown, of the lily and the rose, the dove, the lamb, the Bridegroom and His bride; of streets of gold and jeweled gates. Her devotional books, *Seek and Find*, *Called to be Saints*, and *The Face of the Deep*, are in large part symbolical and allegorical interpretations of passages from the Bible.

Christina's liking for symbolism was no doubt encouraged not only by her study of the Bible but also by her devotion to Dante and Plato and by the Pre-Raphaelite and High Church associations which have already been discussed.[2] She thought Dante the greatest of all poets. Though she did not know the *Divine Comedy* in early girlhood, it was not long before she found much that was congenial to her imagination in the foremost of mystic poets, whose whole theory of poetry posited not only the use of symbol, but also of threefold or fourfold allegory, and who saw the figures and scenes of his vision more clearly and sharply than many of us see the most substantial of everyday objects. Christina's pictures of Paradise are reminiscent, then, not only of the Apocalypse of St. John but also of the Earthly Paradise and the celestial hierarchies of the Florentine seer, and the rose of her poems is at times rarer than Solomon's Rose of Sharon and has a beauty reflected from the rose of the blessed in Dante's empyrean heaven. With him, she likes to regard flowers as prefigurings of spiritual beauty, and like him and the painters of his Italy, she identifies the ecstasy of its citizens with the colors and radiance of the City of God.

She became acquainted with Plato later than with Dante, but was at once the delighted reader of the *Dialogues*. In *Seek and Find*, she records her sympathy with Platonic idealism:

[2] Chapter 3.

Wise were those ancients who felt that all forms of beauty could be but partial expressions of beauty's very self: and who by clue of what they saw groped after Him they saw not. Beauty essential is the archetype of imparted beauty; Life essential of imparted goodness; but such objects, good, living, beatific as we now behold, are not that very Goodness, Life, Beauty, which (please God) we shall contemplate in beatific vision.[3]

Her religious poems are colored by Platonism—inborn or acquired.

There are in Christina's poems certain recurrent symbols besides the more or less conventional ones already referred to. Her own philosophy regarding the matter is stated in several poems and also in prose.

Common things continually at hand, wind or windfall or budding bough, acquire a sacred association, and cross our path under aspects at once familiar and transfigured, and preach to our spirits while they serve our bodies; till not prophets above and sons of prophets, but each creature of time bears witness to things which concern eternity, and without speech or language makes it voice heard: I have an errand to thee. . . . Unto which of all us? . . . To thee. (2 Kings IX-5.)[4]

She tells us that a hundred subtle stings prick her in her daily walk: the cankered apple, the abandoned nest of eggs, the trapped robin, and

> Of all the downfalls in the world,
> The flutter of an Autumn leaf
> Grows grievous by suggesting grief.

The flowers which assume transfigured meaning commonly grow in English gardens: the heliotrope, the crocus, the passion flower, the poppy, and the blossoms of peach and apple.

> Heartsease I found, where Love-lies-bleeding
> Empurpled all the ground:
> Whatever flowers I missed unheeding,
> Heartsease I found.

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[3] *Seek and Find,* p. 14.

[4] *Ibid.,* pp. 203-04.

The outdoor phenomena of the changing seasons are the most frequent analogues of experiences in human life. The familiar comparisons of life to a journey or of aspiration after an ideal to the pursuit of an ever eluding voice or phantom are the bases of some of Christina's finest poems—all allegorical in form. In some of these the journey is a voyage, the ship itself is of familiar significance, and the voyage is on perilous seas in the remote realms of sleep or death.

The greater number of Christina's allegorical poems may be grouped by theme: allegories of life moving toward death, of life distracted by worldly pleasure, of life postponing its highest good because of indifference or folly, or of life spent in the unresting search after the unattainable; allegories of love dying, frustrated, or renounced, and of the shutting out of joy; and allegories of the Christian life.

To the first of these groups belong some of Christina's most exquisite poems. There is the early poem already mentioned, *Dream Land*, and later are *Moonshine* (1852), *Sleep at Sea* (1853), *Up-Hill* (1858), *Amor Mundi* (1865), *The Prince's Progress* (1865), and *The Ballad of Boding* (1881). The scene of all these poems is the dream world, or the present world transfigured by the glimmer of moonlight or enveloped in mystery. *Moonshine* tells of the sailing over the moonlit sea of the vessel bearing a maiden and the pale lover who steers her into another world. *Sleep at Sea* and the *Ballad of Boding* are wholly removed from material reality. *The Ballad of Boding* was published in the *Pageant* volume; its resemblance to the former poem of many years before was at once noticed by Gabriel, who called it "somewhat grimmish." Both poems are allegories of life as a sea upon which human beings are voyaging indifferent or wrong-headed as to their ultimate port. The mood of haunting suggestion is created by the opening lines of *Sleep at Sea:*

> Sound the deep waters:
> Who shall sound that deep?

Too short the plummet
And the sleepers sleep.

Perhaps only Shelley and Coleridge had before this imagined spirits as ideal as those which flit among the masts:

Clear stainless spirits,
White, as white as snow.
Pale spirits wailing
For an overthrow.

Yet the pictures have reality—the driving ship, the red lightning, the smiling sleepers over whom hover the praying spirits.

*The Ballad of Boding* is introduced as the waking dream of three barges: Love-ship and Worm-ship with their crews of pleasure-lovers and seekers of power, and a third ship with its crew of persistent workers. Every detail in the poem possesses definite and perceptible allegorical significance from the sails, the figureheads, and the music of the ships to the loss of Love-Ship in quicksand, the dashing to pieces upon rocks of Worm-Ship, the safe arrival of the third and least bark in the splendor of the sky where it kept "high festival above sun and moon and stars." The freight of symbol is too heavy, and though the destroying Monster of the poem is an awesome figure from the supernatural world, yet he is a bit funny when "his head incredible" retracts its horn "rounding like a babe's new-born" before he beams blandly on the third crew, and when he wriggles like a feeble old worm after he is attacked by "the Flyer from the skies."

Two lyrics far finer than the ominous *Ballad* are related to it in meaning. The working crew of the allegory are near akin to the climbing traveler of *Up-Hill,* and she who treads the downhill path in *Amor Mundi* might have been of the crew of Love-Ship. Though *Up-Hill* was written as early as 1858 and *Amor Mundi* in 1865, in the collected edition of her poems, Christina placed the two poems together, the later poem preceding the earlier in order. In each the images employed are in the main the familiar language of the race so that the poems seem not allegories but

vividly drawn pictures of human experience. Mrs. Meynell has rightly praised in them a strong and gentle brevity without haste, a finality, and a sense of structure and stability scarce possible to surpass.[5]

The longest of all Christina's poems is the romantic allegory, or "exemplary tale made imaginative,"[6] *The Prince's Progress.* It has already been remarked that it was Gabriel who suggested that she expand the song "Too late for love, too late for joy" into a narrative; and he supplied two designs for the first edition. The theme is a variation of the Sleeping Beauty story: the Prince, tempted to delay his progress, arrives too late and the enchanted Princess is dead. There are faint hints of *Pilgrim's Progress* in the interruptions of his journey and the nature of the lands he traverses. Christina has herself outlined the poem, for which she claimed "artistic congruity of construction."

1st, prelude and outset;
2d, an alluring milkmaid;
3d, a trial of barren boredom;
4th, the social element again;
5th, barren boredom in a more uncompromising form;
6th, a wind-up and conclusion.

She admonishes her brother: "See how the subtle elements balance each other and fuse into a noble conglom." The last phrase suggests that Christina did not take the poem with entire seriousness. We feel in reading it some discrepancy in tone between the briskly moving story of the caroling Prince, so "tough to grapple though weak to snare"—a story almost jocular or grotesque in some stanzas—and the quiet, reproachful dirge of the conclusion, in which the pictures are those of sacred paintings. The Virgin of an old Italian master might have inspired the lines:

[5] Alice Meynell: *Christina Rossetti, New Review,* February, 1895, pp. 201-206.

[6] Oliver Elton: *Survey of English Literature,* London, 1920, Vol. IV, p. 26.

Her heart sat silent through the noise
And concourse of the street.
There was no hurry in her hands,
No hurry in her feet;

and the poet shows her kinship with her brother Dante Gabriel in this:

We think her white brows often ached
Beneath her crown.

The narrative itself may not be marked by much inventiveness, yet it progresses through a series of varied pictures; perhaps the most vivid is that which Gabriel used as the basis of the frontispiece: the grieving Prince standing aloof from the veiled bride from whose bier the gold-stiff curtains have been withdrawn. There are throughout bits of symbolism. The Prince, for instance, delays his setting out until the moon is full, a hint of his character, Christina said, adding—"Of course I don't expect the general public to catch these refined clews; but they are there for such minds as mine."[7] Before his last delay, the fields are "green to aftermath"; of this, she wrote: "Aftermath is left for various reasons, the most potent I need scarcely give, but also I think it gives a subtle hint (by symbols) that any more delays may swamp the Prince's last chance."[8]

The story of the dilatory prince may have to do only with love —"Life is sweet, love is sweet, use today while you may"; or the poem may imply that a purposed goal is missed through yielding to enticements by the way. No such yielding is hinted at in *Fata Morgana,* a brief narrative of the swift pursuit of an elusive joy. Even here is the suggestion of the enchantment of dream.

A blue-eyed phantom far before
Is laughing, leaning toward the sun:
Like lead I chase it evermore,
I pant and run.

[7] *Rossetti Papers,* pp. 81-82.
[8] *Ibid.,* p. 85.

It breaks the sunlight bound on bound:
Goes singing as it leaps along
To sheep-bells with a dreamy sound
A dreamy song.

I laugh, it is so brisk and gay;
It is so far before, I weep:
I hope I shall lie down some day,
Lie down and sleep.

The bride's dirge in *The Prince's Progress* sang of love as futile or frustrated; many of the short poems with allegorical suggestion have similar themes. Some of these lay the scenes in the broad daylight of real life, but most of them create the atmosphere of an unapparent world. Frankest of the realistic group are *An Apple Gathering, Another Spring,* and *A Daughter of Eve.* Mr. Mégroz cites the first two of these poems as illustrations that Christina is "the poet of the false dawn of love and of remorse for the unfulfillment of love on earth,"[9]—a mood frequently found in her personal lyrics. *An Apple Gathering* is another of the allegories characterized by "brevity without haste" and the implication of meaning without moralizing.

I plucked pink blossoms from my apple tree
And wore them all that evening in my hair;
Then in due season when I went to see
I found no apples there.

The lover deserts the empty-handed girl for one with heaped-up basket. She who had early worn the blossoms had "counted rosiest apples on the earth of far less worth than love." *Another Spring,* written in September, 1857, is self-described as a "stinging comment" on a past of hesitations and postponements:

If I might see another Spring,
I'd not plant summer flowers and wait,
I'd have my crocuses at once,
My leafless pink mezereons,

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[9] R. L. Mégroz: *Dante Gabriel Rossetti,* p. 92.

My chill-veined snowdrops, choicer yet
My white or azure violet,
Leaf-nested primroses; anything
To blow at once, not late.

*On the Wing* is a dream sonnet of the separation of lovers, but most poignant of all in its sorrow over the remembrance of happier things is *Shut Out*. Once more we are in a world of nonsensuous things as we watch a shadowless spirit build the wall which leaves no loophole through which the lonely one might look into the dear lost garden. Just outside the wall, however, is a very real violet bed in which a lark has built her nest. There is no sharp dividing line in Christina's mind between the tangible and intangible worlds.

There are at least three poems of the sleep, the wounding, or the death of young love. *Dream Love* is a beautiful song of young love in spring and summer drowsing away to poppied death before autumn comes, and *In A Certain Place* is a shorter poem on a similar subject. The sonnet *Love Lies Bleeding* opens with the strong lines:

Love, that is dead and buried, yesterday
Out of his grave rose up before my face;
No recognition in his look, no trace
Of meaning in his eyes dust-dimmed and gray;

another instance of the poet's power to give body to unembodied abstraction, and in doing so to express strong yearning or regret.

Two of Christina's longer poems employ allegory and symbol for the presentment of the experiences of the personal and religious life. These are *From House to Home,* dated November 19, 1855, and an *Old World Thicket,* dated "before 1882."

William Rossetti was not wrong when he judged *From House to Home* as one of his sister's "most manifest masterpieces." Christina not only refused to be disturbed by the resemblance of the opening stanzas to Tennyson's *Palace of Art,* but she also used a stanza form close to his; Christina, however, using three verses of pentameter with a concluding trimeter instead of

changing the second line to a tetrameter as Tennyson did. The theme is wholly different from the older poet's, and after all, previous allegorists, too, had built castles or pleasure houses for the soul before Tennyson erected his. In the chronology of Christina's poems, *From House to Home* follows *The Love of Christ which Passeth Understanding, The Shadow of Dorothea,* and *By the Sea,* the four poems having been composed between November 11 and 19; it is followed by the New Year's Eve chant of 1855. The three preceding poems are full of the thought of the dualism of pleasure and duty, of earth and heaven, and the following New Year's Eve verses voice the mood of a loneliness shared and finally removed only by Jesus; the meaning of *From House to Home* is that though on earth there may be the separation of lovers, loss, and suffering, yet for her who endureth to the end, there is in heaven reunion, love, satisfaction. The old theme clothes itself in pleasant pictures of a very real garden where, while love rules, squirrels, hedgehogs, lizards dwell safe from harm, these pictures contrasting later with images of agony and with visions of the glory and the triumph of the hosts of the blessed in the presence of the Sun of Love. The poem as a whole has little of the objectivity and cool remoteness of allegory; the poet scarcely restrains the exceeding bitter cry of the tortured soul: "It is enough: withhold the stroke."

The subtitle of *The Old World Thicket* is Dante's phrase, *una selva oscura,* and Christina has embodied in her poem some of the ideas of the first canto of the *Divine Comedy.* Dante could not rightly tell how he entered the dark wood, so full of sleep was he when he left the true way; a sleep of the soul which St. Augustine called "forgetfulness of God." The English poet does not know if she were awake or sleeping when she entered the wood in which she, too, in her weariness and despair, is forgetful of God. But then she leaves Dante, and as in the previous poem uses original imagery for her varying moods of remorse, wrathful revolt, and palsied yearning, "each sore defeat of her defeated

life." She is roused from lethargy by the sound of sheep bells and looks up to see that

> The Sun had stooped to earth though once so high,
> Had stooped to earth, in slow
> Warm dying loveliness brought near and low,

and that filing peacefully between the trees, a flock of sheep, "a homeward flock" patient, sun-brightened, were together "journeying toward the sunset and their rest." And so the poem closes not with reflection, but with picture.

It is noticeable that in her poems of dreamlike regions Christina unites visionariness with unusually homely pictures and details—a quality which also marks her poems of supernatural incident and agency, and to some degree her many descriptions of Paradise. She remarks in one of her children's rhymes:

> I know not if earth is merely earth,
> Only that heaven is heaven.

No wonder, then, that her scenes in heaven have substance and reality.

## 2

### Ghosts and Goblins

Seven of Christina Rossetti's poems may be regarded as supernatural in theme in a special sense; that is, if we narrow supernatural to the meaning given it by folk superstition. These are *The Hour and the Ghost, A Chilly Night, A Bird's Eye View, The Poor Ghost,* and *The Ghost's Petition,* all of which use folk-ballad themes; *At Home;* and *Goblin Market.*

In writing of ghosts and goblins, Christina was following one of the strong romantic currents of the nineteenth century. The desire to escape from actuality, to forsake the commonplace in order to feel thrills or to shiver over inexplicable fears—this desire had since the time of Scott and Coleridge been satisfied for many of our poets in the imagining of beings from another world. This is true of all the great Victorians, even Browning

being an exception only in part, and the list of minor poets is a long one: Hood, Beddoes, Motherwell, Dobell, W. B. Scott, Allingham, and others. The themes are various. There are poems of diablerie and the grotesque—malignant ghosts, specter bridegrooms, the Dance of Death; there are sea fairies, water-ladies, mermaids and mermen, many fairies of Shakespeare-Drayton ancestry, or fairy paramours leading mortals to death; there are ghosts of deserted lovers or of the victims of crime; and there are signs and portents of unearthly origin. Spiritualism, too, had crossed the Atlantic in the 1850's, and in 1855 Mrs. Browning was interested in the séances of the American medium, Daniel D. Home.

Christina was not only of her century, but furthermore the people among whom she lived were not averse to the ghostly in intimate forms. The story was told that Ford Madox Brown's first wife was tended in her cradle by a ghostly nurse and Brown's little daughter, Cathy, surely a spiritual kinswoman of Blake, told William Rossetti that she once saw some real angels in the sky.[10] Especially after the death of his wife, Dante Gabriel was drawn to spiritualism and attended séances of various sorts in the hope of communicating with Elizabeth Siddall. Concerning one of these manifestations, in which the Davenport brothers freed themselves from ropes by "spiritual agency," Christina hoped that simple imposture would be the key to the mystery.[11] Yet even the very sane William Michael was interested in the séances of a washer-woman. Christina's friend, Anna Mary Howitt, when an old woman yet supposedly a mentally sound one, was found spinning a top. "Do you wonder?" she asked. "I'm only amusing the dear little children; the room is full of them, and they like nothing so much as to see me spin the top."[12] William Bell Scott tells an incident showing Gabriel

[10] Ford Madox Ford: *Life of Ford Madox Brown,* p. 118.

[11] *Rossetti Papers,* p. 69.

[12] William Bell Scott: *Autobiographical Notes,* Vol. II, p. 242.

Rossetti's superstition.[13] When he and Gabriel were walking in a lane near Penkill Castle, they came across a chaffinch which was very friendly with them; it nestled in Rossetti's hand and caressed him with its beak. Gabriel gravely said: "It is the soul of my wife come to visit me." And at the same moment, the bell at the castle gate rang violently though the servant could find no one seeking entrance. After Rossetti's departure from Penkill the inmates used to hear his voice reading aloud in his room. At Bognor, with his mother, Christina, and Watts-Dunton, Rossetti construed the fall of a tree as a sign of disaster. Christina smiled at the notion.[14] William Michael carried on a correspondence with his father's friend and fellow student, Barone Seymour Kirkup, of Florence, a correspondence full of stories of the actions of his dead wife, "who is spiritually much alive and in habitual intercourse with her little daughter."[15] It is noticeable that Christina herself recognized signs and wonders only in the country of her imagination. In her *Face of the Deep,* she identifies spiritualists and punishable sorcerers. Like a good Protestant, she is, too, sceptical of the saints' miracles which she records with tolerant amusement in her reading diary of the Church Year.

Her mind was stored not only with her own visions but also with stories of faëry and the macabre derived from what she read as a child and more or less throughout her life. She knew the old ballads and Scott, and she and her sister and brothers were very fond of Thomas Keightley's *Fairy Mythology* (published 1833) and of the author and compiler himself, Mr. Keightley being one of the few Englishmen who called on their father in their home. Hone's *Everyday Book,* that strange early nineteenth-century compendium for instruction and entertainment, contained many romantic selections and was illustrated with

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Theodore Watts-Dunton: *Old Familiar Faces,* p. 186.

[15] *Rossetti Papers—passim.*

woodcuts of nightmarish monsters. We have already noted the reflections in her experimental work of *The Arabian Nights* and Maturin's tales. When Mr. J. H. Ingram was seeking biographers for his series, *Eminent Women,* Christina found reasons for not writing of others, but did agree to write a book about Mrs. Radcliffe. One of the latest references to her reading is in a letter where she recommends Wilkie Collins's *Moonstone* as a book which she and Gabriel had enjoyed.

The earliest of her published poems with a dominantly supernatural appeal is a really fine one: *The Hour and the Ghost.* It was apparently suggested by the ballad of *James Harris* or *The Demon Lover.* In the folk ballad the woman for the usual seven years and more has been a happy wife and mother before there comes to her one in the figure of the old lover who has been given up as lost at sea. This demon lover forces her to keep her vows to him and go with him on a ship. She sees his cloven feet, and then

> "O whaten a mountain is yon," she said,
> "All so dreary wi' frost and snow?"
> "O yon is the mountain of hell," he said,
> "Where you and I will go."

In *The Hour and the Ghost* it is a bride who prays her bridegroom to save her from the ghost of the lover to whom she had been false. This avenging spirit, too, urges their former troth and compels her to cross the seas in the cold with him. Her own hope is that she may return to her bridegroom and that he should be true to her, but the Ghost chants in her ear words and music foreign to the world of the folk ballad:

> O fair frail sin,
> O poor harvest gathered in!
> Thou shalt visit him again
> To watch his heart grow cold:
> To know the gnawing pain
> I knew of old;
> To see one much more fair

Fill up the vacant chair,
Fill his heart, his children bear;
While thou and I together
In the outcast weather,
Toss and howl and spin.

Christina Rossetti has removed her story to the land of vision; neither Bride nor Bridegroom sees the Ghost, though the Bride feels his grasp and hears his taunts and threats. The emotional tension of the Bride lends reality to the Ghost's presence, but the delicately wrought poem with its varying rhyme effects and stanzas of changing length, with its sense of the sadness of broken vow and shortened breath, is very unlike the stark old ballad with its diabolic steersman, its ship with sails o'taffetie and masts o'beaten gold, its lilies of Italy of no greater actuality than the hills of heaven and the mountains of hell. The closing words of Christina's dramatic lyric, however, afford a glimpse into the hell of medieval superstition.

To the same year as *The Hour and the Ghost*, 1856, belongs *A Chilly Night*. There is little imitation of the ballad manner here, though the verse has approximately the ballad movement. The man (or woman) looking from the lattice at dead of night sees the ghosts in the moonlight and recognizing his mother prays that he may join her, but though she strives to make him hear, she and her companions vanish at cockcrow with never a word. The poem has some good passages: the ghosts stand in the blank moonlight but no shadow lies on the ground; the mother "tosses her shadowless hair," and the subtle ghosts grow sullen "in the sad night on the wane." Both Christina's friend William Allingham,[16] and her brother's critic, Robert Buchanan,[17] also wrote poems of the return of a ghostly mother to her child or children.

[16] W. Allingham: *Songs, Ballads, and Stories: A Dream*, London, 1887.

[17] Robert Buchanan: *The Poetical Works of: The Dead Mother*, London, 1884.

*A Bird's Eye View* (1863) is hardly a good poem, and certainly has a wretched title. The two ravens, who foreknow the death of the bride and who alone can explain why the ship bearing her sank, are reminiscent of *The Twa Corbies,* and at least two of Christina's contemporaries had used the talking bird who has supernatural power of prophecy: Barham in the poem "As I lay a-thynkynge," the sweet prettiness of which pleased Christina, and Jean Ingelow, in her beautiful lyric of mountain death, "Requiescat in Pace."

The two supernatural poems to be next considered use one of the motives of *Clerk Saunders* or *Sweet William's Ghost.* This ballad was much admired in the Pre-Raphaelite circle. Elizabeth Siddall endeavored to paint from it, and Theodore Watts-Dunton, in his distinguished essay *The Renascence of Wonder,* quotes one of its stanzas as exemplifying the romantic note at its best. The motive of the dead lover returning to the loved one becomes in Christina's *Poor Ghost* the story of the woman returning for her lover, of his fear of her as dead, and of her reproach for his having called her back to earth by his tears. In *The Ghost's Petition,* it is the husband who returns to the wife to beg that she cease the weeping that prevents his resting in his dark but peaceful grave. This idea of excessive grief as perturbing spirits is frequently found in the ballads of many countries: "For the perpetual weeping of relations burns the deceased, we all do know."[18] In the *Poor Ghost* there is the same thought as in *The Hour and The Ghost* and *A Bird's Eye View* —the fickleness of love, the quickness with which the dead are forgot, a thought which recurs in Christina Rossetti's lyrics, but not very often.

Neither of these ballad-like poems is wholly successful in creating a supernatural atmosphere; it is not in that respect that

[18] From the Hindu. Quoted by Eino Railo: *The Haunted Castle, A Study of the Elements of English Romanticism,* London, 1927, p. 375.

Christina Rossetti showed any peculiar power, but rather in her faculty for creating spirits who are wholly immaterial and yet who attract sympathy because in feelings and desires, they are still so close to simple human beings. Mrs. Browning's wicked specter of the convent can give her victim a brown rosary; Scott's knight can leave the imprint of his hand on rafter and on lover's wrist, but Christina's ghosts are as shadowy as the moonlit shade of the most delicate of the neo-romantic poems of apparitions, Sidney Dobell's *Keith of Ravelston.* They unfold no horrors; except for one of them, the grave is a place of remote yet quiet rest. They revisit earth to do no ill but only to satisfy love; so the tone of the poems is sad, wistful. There are even touches of Rossettian prettiness, for one comes with golden hair all fallen below the knee and face as white as a snowdrop. The best of these poems of ghostly visitants is one which especially exhibits Christina's characteristic success in making real the possible relations of the living and the dead. *At Home* must have been composed at a time when the poet was feeling strongly the inevitability of death and the aloneness of the grave, for *Up-Hill* and the depressing *Today and Tomorrow* were written on the same day. The spirit who seeks the familiar house and room is no longer at home, for as she listens to the pleasant chatter and happy planning of her friends, she learns that she is of yesterday, and though yearning to stay at home, she has passed away from love. Her presence casts no chill across the cheerful room.

As it is, *Goblin Market* is so perfect a work of art and so delightful a fancy that its critic feels that he should fall under condemnation with those who "murder to dissect" and botanize where no trespassers should be admitted. Yet Mr. Lowes has shown us that the Road to Xanadu has many fair prospects and many shadowed recesses which are no less pleasurable for being explored. Following him with a difference and afar off, we may find that the wares enticing us to *Goblin Market* came from

many lands before they grew into beauty under Christina's hands and found a place in a whole which had not existed before.

Christina has warned us away from seeking a moral in the poem; it has no moral, she says. Yet one of the distinguishing charms of romantic poetry is its vague suggestion of half-formed or half-forgotten thoughts, dimly understood taboos and ideals. Mr. Watts-Dunton has endeavored to show that at the core of the old romanticism is the belief that the evil forces of nature assail man through his sense of beauty.[19] This *natura maligna* in Christina's goblin world is not the beauty of the Elf-queen's realm or of the Bower of Bliss, or of *La Belle Dame sans Merci,* but the beauty and the lusciousness of forbidden fruit. Fruit peculiarly stimulated her sensuous imagination. She had already in *The Dead City* indulged her fancy in describing the fruit of the city—sun-red apples, the nectarine and peach, grapes purple, pale, and ruby-red,

> And unremembered others too,
> Fruits of every size and hue,
> Juicy in their ripe perfection,
> Cool beneath the cool reflection
> Of the curtains' skyey blue.

Emily Dickinson has summed up such a moral as the fruit suggests in the quatrain:

> Forbidden fruit a flavor has
> That lawful orchards mocks;
> How luscious lies the pea within
> The pod that Duty locks.

In the *Goblin Market* the extreme lusciousness of the fruit suggests the allurement to sin, and there is a touch of the uncanny and sinister as in other romantic bowers of bliss. Mr. Elton has pointed out that the poem plays with spiritual ideas, such world-old ideas as temptation, entrapment of evil, sacrifice, and

[19] Theodore Watts-Dunton: *Poetry and the Renascence of Wonder,* London, 1916.

rescue.[20] William Rossetti[21] found a connection between the readiness of the one sister in the poem to hazard all for the other and Christina's confidence in her own sister, to whom she dedicated the poem. At any rate, *Goblin Market* gains seriousness by the tribute at the end to a sister's self-sacrificing love.

I have already referred to Christina's fondness for Keightley's *Fairy Mythology:* the book is full of entertaining stories not only of English elves and fairies but also of Scandinavian trolls and dwarfs, of German kobolds, of Norman "gobelins," who liked to give sweetmeats to children. There is no tale of a market, but there are stories of fairy fairs and fairy banquets, of the pining away of human beings who did not conform to the wishes of the elves, of the magic influence of a fairy draught, and of spots of turf accursed by malignant troll. The frontispiece of Mr. Keightley's book is a drawing by George Cruikshank of various beings of the supernatural world engaged in characteristic actions; witches are riding through the sky, elves are flitting about a weather cock, fairies dance in a ring, and in one corner is a group of grotesque gnomes, one of whom with his long parrot beak recalls Christina's parrot-voiced goblin—a goblin who appears as a true parrot in Christina's water-color sketches for the poem. The poem is an interesting illustration of Christina's fad for grotesque animals. No wonder that when she created for her own purpose real *märchen* creatures, she thought of each merchantman in terms of familiar animals.

> One had a cat's face,
> One whisked a tail,
> One tramped at a rat's pace,
> One crawled like a snail,
> One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry,
> One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry.

They fluttered like pigeons or glided like fish. One was parrot-voiced and jolly, one whistled like a bird; their tones were

[20] Oliver Elton: *Survey of English Literature,* Vol. IV, p. 25.

[21] *Poetical Works,* Note, p. 459.

smooth as honey, their voices as the voices of doves sounding "kind and full of loves in the pleasant weather." This magic lure of musical tone is of course a repeated motive in myth and legend. Christina's own sketches of the goblins picture "slim agile figures in a close-fitting garb of blue; their faces, hands and feet are sometimes human, sometimes brute-like."[22] Gabriel's frontispiece for the first edition of the poem represents the head of a cat, a wombat, a rat, an owl, a cockatoo, and a sunfish; his second design shows three fat-paunched, short-legged creatures.

There are Pre-Raphaelite touches in the poem, some of which are traits characteristic of Christina as well as of her brother. The riotous description of the taste of the fruit, its odor, the fresh bloom upon it so pleasant to the touch, is joined with the suggestion of rich color or sheen; purple and golden flags, blue-veined stone, dew-pearly night. No wonder Gabriel Rossetti was ready to make drawings for such a picture as that of the two sisters:

> Golden head by golden head
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Cheek to cheek and breast to breast
> Locked together in one nest.

Laura stretched her gleaming neck (a Pre-Raphaelite one) "like a rush-imbedded swan, like a lily from the bell."

I suppose we all enjoy most in the poem its rhythm—its rush, its hurry, its appropriate changes in cadence. At the opening of the poem some eighteen delightfully rhythmical lines are made up of the names of fruits, epithets being added in only a few instances; and Browning or Poe has not given us a more telling succession of words of motion or gesture. Hardly less remarkable is the union of romance and realism. Such lines as

> Like a royal virgin tower
> Topped with gilded dome and spire

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[22] *Poetical Works,* Note, p. 460.

Close beleaguered by a fleet
Mad to tug her standard down

are immediately followed by the homely proverb:

One may lead a horse to water,
Twenty cannot make him drink.

At night Laura and Lizzie may be "like two wands of ivory tipped with gold for awful kings," but in the daylight when they milk the cows and feed the poultry, they are neat as bees. The goblins tear Lizzie's gown and soil her stocking while they press upon her magic fruit. The poem is, then, another illustration of Christina's power to build a bridge between the real and the ideal, of her success in the field of realistic supernaturalism.

## Chapter IX

## POEMS OF THE MATERIAL WORLD AND OF THE PERSONAL LIFE

The range of subjects chosen by Christina Rossetti in her poetry is more restricted than that of some of the more important of her women contemporaries. Her acquaintance, Matilde Blind, endeavored to turn the story of the evolution of man into a long poem of reflection and generalized narration. Miss Ingelow wrote not only secular and religious lyrics and ballads but also idyls of domestic life, realistic conversations put into verse, and narrative poems based on Roman myth and Bible history. The two women poets of her day whom Christina most admired, Augusta Webster and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, went even farther afield for material. Mrs. Webster was a disciple of Browning in writing blank verse dramatic monologues depicting characters quite different from herself and belonging to her own time or to the past. In one of the poems the speaker is a castaway, a woman driven to sin by the evil suspicions of society; in another, a man grown indifferent to life because of the boring frivolities of a trivial wife; and in a third, the medieval Saint Alexius; the best of her dramas relates to the Roman emperor Caligula. Mrs. Browning, like Christina, wrote lyrics, sonnets, and ballads, but also poems of Italian liberty and nationalism and a sociological novel in verse, and translated Greek drama.

Christina never read or studied a subject for the purpose of imaginative re-creation. The Felicia Hemans and Adelaide Procter sort of rhymed retelling of foreign legends which were popu-

lar in Christina's youth are not found in her repertory. Though some of her poems show indirect influences from her reading and though many of her religious poems were inspired by the Holy Scriptures, she is like Emily Dickinson in working in the main from what she herself experienced in reality or within the imagination, although she succeeded in more varied fields of poetry than the Amherst poet ever entered upon.

Miss Rossetti's poems of the material world are by no means sharply distinguished from her poems of the supernatural. Just as the supernatural world gains realism from the presence there of familiar everyday objects and phenomena, so this world of perishable stuff is often touched with wonder or mystery. It is natural, then, that her poems of the material world and of her personal life should at times repeat the themes of her allegorical or dream poems.

Long before Christina was twenty years old, she was writing verses about all that she found most beautiful in the realms of nature and of illusion; yet she was at the same time chanting the refrain *vanitas vanitatum* and endeavoring to voice what she imagined to be the ecstasy of the martyr and the peace of the conventional novice on forsaking the delights of this restless, changing world. In the poetry of her maturity, these same contrasting themes recur, and she reveals herself as the poet of the sensuous beauty of the world and of its brevity and evil allurements; the poet of love and of renunciation; the poet of unsatisfied cravings and of restraint and asceticism.

At least four poems are in praise of martyrdom: *The Martyr,* "I have fought a good fight," *A Martyr,* and *The Martyr's Song.* They are poems of victory with less emphasis on blood and fire than on the martyr's certainty of endless bliss in the presence of Christ. The early poem of *The Novice* is significant only because Christina here expresses the idea that the solitude and restricted feeling of the nun's life are more to be desired than the disquiet and changing fortunes of love—a mood which appar-

ently returned in her later life. *The Three Nuns,* a more mature and finer poem, is somewhat similar, but the two poems inspired by St. Elizabeth of Hungary, the sonnets—*A Portrait,* and *St. Elizabeth*—catch more of the exultation of the medieval saint in the indulgence of utmost self-sacrifice.

Decidedly the most noteworthy of these poems of what we might call official renunciation is *The Convent Threshold.* It was written in July, 1858; shortly before, in June, Christina had composed the group of fine poems relating to death, *Up-Hill* and the verses of the same date; not long afterwards, in the autumn, she wrote those connected in theme with *From House to Home,* poems of patience and separation. Gabriel called *The Convent Threshold* "a very splendid piece of feminine asceticism." The woman on the convent threshold is writing to him with whom she had sinned a pleasant sin and from whom she had been barred by blood, a father's and a brother's. Her lover is one who has sought only knowledge and pleasure; now she entreats that he repent and climb with her the kindling stair to heaven. Mrs. Meynell[1] has remarked that the poem is "a song of penitence for love that yet praises love more fervently than would a chorus hymeneal." In spite of Gabriel's opinion, the passion of the novitiate is surely not altogether ascetic; in one mood she hardly regrets the past and shrinks from the future:

> How long must stretch those years and years?
> I turn from you my cheeks and eyes,
> My hair which you will see no more—
> Alas for joy that went before,
> For joy that dies, for love that dies!

There are echoes of Dante here. The skyward stair is the ladder of the *Paradiso* which ascends from the planet of abstinence and contemplation to the Beatific Vision, and which sparkles in flame when a certain step is touched by the splendors who on earth had been the great monastics and contemplatives of the

[1] The *New Review:* February, 1895, pp. 201-06.

world which Dante knew.[2] So, too, the bareness of Dante's speech is found in such lines as the description of a martyr's fate as "racked, roasted, crushed, wrenched limb from limb," and his audacity in such a paradox as "through the dark my silence spoke like thunder." But Christina noticeably departs from the great mystic in failing to sublimate human into divine love: if the woman reaches heaven first, she will yearn like the Blessed Damozel earthwards toward her lover, and reunited in heaven they shall meet as once they met "and love with old familiar love." In this expression of human longing, the poem is in interesting contrast with one of Augusta Webster's on the story of an Italian saint's renunciation.[3] Sister Annunciata of the poem of that title says farewell to her lover only after strong crying and tears, but having said farewell, it is forever: dedicated to Christ, she must emulate the Alexandrian and the Siennese Saints Catherine of her vision, and having become the bride of Christ, must root from her heart and memory every thought of her earthly lover. She dies a saint, but one questions the real origin of her dying ecstasy. The great length of Mrs. Webster's interesting poem as compared with *The Convent Threshold* makes the latter appear another example of Christina's economy of her resources—an impression strengthened if we turn to Miss Ingelow's[4] verse narrative of the two lovers of the days of Lollard martyrdom.

The thought of *The Convent Threshold,* that love renounced on earth may be claimed anew beyond the gates of death, is the theme of many of Christina's more personal poems, the poems in which she writes autobiography. Her great sonnet series, *Monna Innominata,* tells the story of love foregone; only in dreams are she and her friend at one, and youth and beauty having passed away, only a life reborn will annul loss and the grief

[2] Dante: *The Paradiso,* Canto XXI.

[3] A. Webster: *Dramatic Studies,* "Sister Annunciata," London, Cambridge, 1866.

[4] Jean Ingelow: *Poems,* "The Maid-Martyr," London, 1888.

of separation. It is to be recalled, however, that her own account of the unnamed lady and her lover is that the barrier between them was one "held sacred by both" yet not such as to render "mutual love incompatible with mutual honour." The *donna innominata,* then, says less of renunciation than of love and the pain of parting. Thus Sonnet 7 ends:

> My heart's a coward though my words are brave—
> We meet so seldom, yet we surely part
> So often: this is a problem for your art!
> Still I find comfort in his Book who saith
> Though jealousy be cruel as the grave,
> And death be strong, yet love is strong as death.

Their subjects and origin being what they are, these sonnets challenge comparison with the love poems of their author's contemporaries, Emily Dickinson, Alice Meynell, and Mrs. Browning. The biographers[5] of Emily Dickinson disagree as to the identity of the man she loved, and so we are not sure whether she was separated from him by the barrier of his marriage or by that of her father's wishes, yet we may be sure of the fact of her renunciation. The girl Alice Thompson, years before Wilfred Meynell became her husband, resolved to see no more the priest whose vows forbade that their friendship should continue to grow increasingly dear to both.[6]

The New England poet, we know, resisted her own or her lover's desire that they break the bonds of real or imagined duty. She wrote the simple definition:

> Renunciation is the choosing
> Against itself
> Itself to justify
> Unto itself.[7]

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[5] Josephine Pollitt: *Emily Dickinson, the Human Background of Her Poetry,* New York and London, 1930; Genevieve Taggard: *The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson,* New York, London, 1930; Martha Bianchi: *Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson,* New York and Boston, 1924.

[6] Viola Meynell: *Alice Meynell,* London, 1929, p. 45.

[7] Emily Dickinson: *Further Poems,* Boston, 1929, p. 167.

For her, as for Christina, such a choice was costly:

> I took one draught of life,
> I'll tell you what I paid,
> Precisely an existence—
> The market price, they said.[8]

Within her own heart, however, she was far bolder, far less reticent than the English woman whose birth year was the same as her own. After the manner of the latter, she might write of how she and her lover had each bound on the other's crucifix, and, the grave deposed, would rise to a new marriage justified through Calvaries of love; but her more frequent mood is that of possession: the lover is husband—"mine by the right of white election'; she is wife—"title divine . . . the Wife without the sign"; "He put the belt around my life—I heard the buckle snap." Christina is no less certain of love, but she would have faltered before such invasions of the sanctities of marriage, nobly passionate as they were.

The second of the *Monna Innominata* sonnets is a wish that the lady could remember the time of her first meeting with her lover. Before Christina wrote this sonnet but unknown to her, Alice Thompson, later Mrs. Meynell, had expressed the same desire in her poem *An Unmarked Festival.* So separated was she from her friend that only in dreams must she allow herself a thought of him: her perfect sonnet, *Renouncement,* expresses, then, a denial of the fulfillment of love more absolute than anything in Christina Rossetti's or Emily Dickinson's poetry; yet such is Mrs. Meynell's shepherding of her thoughts, her holding them "circumspect and right," that emotion is held in straiter bands than in the poems of the other two women.

With Mrs. Browning, Christina may be said to have courted comparison when she wrote in the foreward to her sonnet series: "had the Great Poetess of our own day and nation only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited

[8] *Ibid.,* p. 135.

her to bequeath to us, in lieu of the 'Portuguese Sonnets,' an inimitable *donna innominata* drawn not from fancy but from feeling and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura." Many students of nineteenth-century poetry have made the comparison and have given to Mrs. Browning praise for the voicing of more varied and more passionate emotions, to Miss Rossetti the palm for more consistently fine art. An emotion which both poets express is that of humility in the presence of deep love and of the dedication of themselves to love without stint or bound. English poetry, however, is the richer because Mrs. Browning's is a story of happy love and Christina Rossetti's of a cabined, cribbed, confined, yet enduring affection.

Other poems of Christina's have to do with her acceptance of loss, her striving after contentment with a maimed life, her determination to abide by a choice which broke her heart. Her prayer that she should be satisfied with "the lowest place" occurs in at least three poems. In them she seems not so much the English woman, "doing all from self-respect," as she does such an Italian saint as the ascetic Catherine of Siena who cultivated an exaggerated humility. Two poems of 1857 have to do with the crushing of cherished desires—*Memory* and *Introspective.* The second she did not herself publish, her brother printing it after her death. It is the expression of such anguish as another must not see, but is no less the iteration of the resolve never to bend or groan when pain probes deep or torture wrings. Elsewhere in the allegory, *From House to Home,* she expresses with more reserve this same stoicism:

> Therefore in patience I possess my soul;
> Yea, therefore as a flint I set my face.

The vein of renouncement of human love and pleasure sometimes deepened until it became the discipline and stern denial of the ascetic. In the greater part of her work, Christina expresses her warm delight in the beauty of material things and in the nobility of human character, but at times, though not often, she

seems to feel that in order to exercise ourselves unto godliness, we must see the world as evil and so regard the enjoyment of earthly gifts as incompatible with the contemplation of the divine and the attainment of union with God. The mystic has often valued self-discipline as a means of purgation before illumination comes to the soul who thirsts after the Infinite. In a few poems, Christina apparently exalts lack of bodily comfort and rejection of temptation as ends in themselves. The sober-colored, unbecoming garments which she, the beauty lover, wore; the bare, plainly furnished room she accustomed herself to—these were suggestions of the ascetic strain in her warm Italian nature. The earliest poem in which it becomes uppermost is one written when she was twenty: *The Three Enemies*, a dialogue of the soul with the world, the flesh, and the devil. Whatever rigor the poem might possess is offset by the spirit which pervades it—the tender and grateful love for the Crucified One. The tempted soul gives to the fine things promised it an answer similar to George Herbert's in his *Quip:*

> Speak not at large, say, I am thine:
> And then they have their answer home.

Christina's sonnet, *The World*, pictures the same sort of subtle beast as grins from the pages of medieval sermon or painted fresco, a very monster "with pushing horns and clawed and clutching hands." Less powerful treatments of the same theme are grouped under the caption *The World.*

It has been noted in her biography that Christina had very early taken to heart the lesson of Ecclesiastes, and the early sonnet beginning "Vanity of vanities" was followed by many poems in which the phrase is title or refrain. In *Seek and Find* she makes an interesting comment on the fascination which the thought held for her:

> "Vanity of vanities," as "Solomon in all his glory"—states and restates it, amounts to so exquisite a dirge over dead hope and paralyzed effort that we are almost ready to fall in love with our own

desolation; and seeing that "man walketh in a vain shadow"—to become vain as that shadow, and to drift through life without disquietude, because without either aim or aspiration.[9]

One phase of the vanity of human wishes of which she often sang was the transitoriness of beauty and might. There are in our poetry few more beautiful poems on that solemn theme than her chant for New Year's Eve, 1860. She had recently marked her thirtieth birthday; so according to Victorian reckoning, she was entering on middle age; love had passed her by, and as yet few besides her family knew of the greatness of her poetic gift or of the abundant proofs she had given of achievement. She therefore wrote of the passing away of "chances, beauty, and youth." Less solemn are the verses *Consider*. Herrick, the poet of times trans-shifting, would hardly have disliked to acknowledge as his own the opening of this lyric so comparable to his in form, thought, and intimacy of language. Christina, however, frequently embodied in her poems of the brief existence of beauty the assured hope that some day the corruptible and the mortal would put on incorruption and immortality, and beauty reflect a fairness unknown to earth.

It is a familiar truth to all of us that the man or woman who fears the evil lurking in the bower of bliss or who grows melancholy over the beauty which must die is one who has crushed joy's grape and deeply loved all beautiful things. Christina herself wrote that inherent in all beauty is "a subtle influence whereby it may sadden in the very act of delighting us."[10] It is especially in her poetry of the outdoor world, and in particular of living things, that we realize how greatly she did delight in beauty and how deep was her capacity for joy. In a prose passage,[11] she commented on a text from I Kings IV, 33, referring to Solomon's wise speech concerning trees:

[9] *Seek and Find*, p. 272.
[10] *Seek and Find*, p. 181.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

It needs no Solomon to enter into the inexhaustible cheerfulness of "all green things," an expression which we may fairly interpret as including the whole vegetable creation. . . . Fancy what this world would be were it prevalently clay-coloured or slate-coloured! Fancy what it would become if it went on supplying all that is necessary, but not our necessaries in their familiar garb of beauty! Suppose we no longer had cornfields and orchards, but a magazine of "constituents," gluten, starch, saccharine matter, what not: no longer leafy branches for shade and leafless branches for fuel, but fogs and clouds for the one, and combustible gases for the other. While as the case stands our study of "all green things" may fitly become a study of beauty and pleasure, an exercise of thankfulness.

Her study and observation results in her putting before us the color and the loveliness of growing things and the quaintness or helplessness of small creatures, while her exercise of thankfulness becomes a paean of praise, a *Benedicite, omnia opera Domini.*

The longest of her nature poems is such a canticle, *All Thy Works Praise Thee, O Lord.* A portion of this was adapted for a harvest festival—"A Processional of Creation"—sung at the evening service in the church which Christina attended, October 21, 1897.[12] Written shortly before this song of praise was *The Months, a Pageant,* the poem giving title to the 1881 volume of Miss Rossetti's poetry. It is a masque in which boys and girls take the part of the months and are attended by birds, sheep, flowers, and fruit. The narrative element is the race of the seasons. The stage directions in prose are often delicately beautiful; for example:

Before March has done speaking, a voice is heard approaching accompanied by a twittering of birds. April comes along singing and stands outside and out of sight to finish her song.

This pageant of the months is an instance of Christina's frequent reference to the succession of the months and the changes of the seasons—this being too, the source of many of her symbols. One of her pleasant poems on the theme is *The Year's*

[12] *Poetical Works,* p. 463.

*Windfalls.* Though spring and summer she most loved, she has many a good word to say for winter and its frosts and snow.

Her various pictures of natural phenomena reveal how finely susceptible she was to sense impressions. Much of the poetry and the prose of the contemporary women already mentioned shows this aliveness of the senses and minuteness of observation. In this respect Emily Brontë is very like Christina Rossetti. In Emily Brontë's poetry we are made to see the purples and browns of the moors, the color changes wrought by sun or rain on cloud or wall; dark trees cast a spell upon her, and heather, dark and long, could enfold her in its brown, branching arms; she exults in the wetness and the windiness, the tang of her beloved Yorkshire moors. So in Christina's nature poetry, certain definite sense impressions recur often. She is constantly recalling the sound of rain and of wind, of falling leaves, and of the fluttering and singing of birds—bird raptures she once calls this last. She speaks of God's accepting the "solemn mirth" of the winds, and the wind in her poems is no destroying power. In her verses, windy-winged birds whirr by and the song of the bird of Paradise soars "like incense to the skies." The full scent of buds, the perfume of meadowsweet, the colors of rose and violet and daffodil she enjoys only less than what she has a genius for describing: the color, the taste, the feeling of fruit—"golden fruit fresh plucked and ripe." She likes, too, the beneficence of dews who give themselves in "silent secret ways," and the comfort of cool shady places in gardens. She sees no less vividly and outlines or paints with a few strokes such things as the signs of the seasons: "the russet golden pomp of leaves" in autumn, and how in winter "empty nests show black and grim." Little-regarded aspects of nature attract her:

> the curious sudden stool
> That perfects in a night.

She gives tangible form to spiritual things. In one of the most glowing of her poems, she describes a dream of Paradise, and

having placed there the lovely material things of earth, she concludes with the wish:

I hope to see these things again
But not as once in dreams by night;
To see them with my very sight
And touch and handle and attain.

The background in her poems is the English countryside. We get no impression at all of cottages and mills and seldom of farms, but of green things and of the small animals who leap or crawl or fly. Elms, limes, or willows grow by clear streams; hawthorn hedgerows border green cornfields, and the listener is seldom out of hearing of far-off sea or tinkling sheep bell. Purple and crimson lord it over more subdued shades, though the golden glories of marigold and daffodil sparkle in the meadows, and "the leaf-nested primrose," Jacob's ladder, and Solomon's seal share honor with the poppy "brimmed with sleepy death." The birds of English verse—the lark, cuckoo, and nightingale as well as the robin, the wren, and the noisy crow—fly above the cornfields or nest in the pleasant places of the gardens; but no less does "the pendulum spider" swing there or the blue-black beetle "transact his business." Most characteristic of many of Christina's outdoor scenes is the presence in them of unpleasant little animals—frogs and moles and mice. Caterpillars and gnats, snails and slugs have to her no more unwelcome suggestions than singing birds and squirrels and butterflies. One is sometimes grateful for the little touches of humor which the appearance or the activities of these creatures give. *Twilight Calm* and *Summer* (1864) have many such pictures. When Eve mourns at the death of Abel, each piteous beast reacts to her sorrow.

The mouse paused in his walk
And dropped his wheaten stalk;
Grave cattle wagged their heads
In rumination;
The eagle gave a cry
From his cloud station:

Larks on thyme beds
Forbore to mount or sing;
Bees dropped upon the wing;
The raven perched on high
Forgot his ration;
The conies in their rock,
A feeble nation,
Quaked sympathetical;

. . . .

Only the serpent in the dust,
Wriggling and crawling,
Grinned an evil grin and thrust
His tongue out with its fork.[13]

At the present time, the nature poets, W. H. Davies and Ralph Hodgson, write now and then in similar strain with the same sympathies. A delightful fancy salted with a pinch of amused satire is *Freaks of Fashion,* an account of a bird conference on the subject—how about fashions? Christina gives the last word to the judicial Auk:

Let colours sort themselves, my dears,
Yellow, or red, or peach;
The main points, as it seems to me,
We mothers have to teach,
Are form and texture, elegance,
An air reserved, sublime;
The mode of wearing what we wear
With due regard to month and clime.
But now, let's all compose ourselves,
It's almost breakfast time.

Writing as often as she did on the same themes, Christina descends at times to the commonplace and trivial. We are reminded of Wordsworth for more than one reason when we read in *The Lambs of Grasmere* of how

From lamb to lamb the shepherds went
With teapots for the bleating mouths,
Instead of nature's nourishment.

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[13] *Poetical Works,* p. 373.

At other times we grow weary of roses and lilies as well as of the too often repeated analogy of the fading of leaf and flower and the lessening of human strength. Yet criticism is ungrateful in the face of poems so cheerful or so picturesque as *Spring Quiet* and *The First Spring Day, Autumn,* and *To What Purpose Is this Waste?*

The most joyous of all of Christina's poems, however, is not a nature lyric but a song of love, *My Birthday.* Her brother wondered over what occasioned the mood, but no one needs biography for understanding why a woman who felt as deeply and imagined as vividly as Christina did should compose this strain of sheer rapture. *In A Lane* is another lyric of happy love. In more than one of her personal sonnets, the poet expresses quiet happiness in the sense of loving and being loved in return and in the belief in love as noble and ennobling. *Afterthought* is a reflection on the punishment of Adam and Eve; surely Eve kept one part of Eden since the angels did not strip her of the accustomed hand for leading and the accustomed heart for love. And most expressive of all of constant, untroubled affection is the sonnet to her mother dedicating to her *A Pageant and Other Poems* and now printed as the dedication of the daughter's collected poems.

The more troubled aspects of love are much more frequently mirrored in Christina's poems. It has already been observed how often she treated allegorically the theme of love frustrated, its dawn followed by twilight or night rather than by noon. In more literal, apparently more personal language, she writes of love sought but never found (*By the Water, Somewhere or Other*), of love unreturned (*Touching 'Never'*), or scorned (*Twice*). Two objective love poems are *The Triad* and *Soeur Louise de la Misericorde,* both un-Victorian in their frankness. The first is Pre-Raphaelite in its vivid painting of the three women who stood only on the threshold of love; the second represents the mistress of Louis XIV as saying goodbye to desire and to being

desired when she is exchanging the court for the sisterhood. Perhaps finest of the love lyrics are the exquisite songs, *Echo* and "When I am dead, my dearest," and the sonnets which she wrote before she was twenty: *Remember, Rest, After Death,* and its companion poem, *A Pause.*

These poems have as much to do with death as with love, but death which brings no haunting fear. Christina once wrote of the dead as those "who characteristically go down into silence"; and again: "The land of the shadow of death is no longer the dominion of the king of terrors, but rather a tiring-closet for the bride of the King of Kings." In *Rest,* she whose heart has ceased to stir is curtained with a silence more musical than song. Since many of the poems express infinite weariness, in them death is welcomed as bringing rest; others contrast life and death and face the fact of the grave:

> There a very little girth
> Can hold round what once the earth
> Seemed too narrow to contain.

A fancy frequently intimated is that of sentience after death. In *Life Hidden,* it is said of the recently dead:

> She doth not see, but knows; she doth not feel,
> And yet is sensible; she hears no sound
> Yet counts the flight of time and doth not err.

*After Death* and *Pause* picture the speaker as lying dead with soul earth-bound and loitering on its way until it catches the sound of a longed-for step or voice. Not unlike Shelley, Christina, too, thinks of the corruption of the grave, but the dread thought changes quickly to a belief in the grave as the portal of Paradise, a belief which at times flashes out in such an unforgetable image as this:

> One passed me like a flash of lightning by
> To ring clear bells of heaven beyond the stars.

Not long after Charles Cayley's and her mother's death, Christina expressed in *The Face of the Deep* other feelings of hers

about those whom she had loved and lost, feelings which underlie not a few of her poems;

In that veiled land saints abide. Some saints who loved us on earth are there, saints whom we loved and love. If we call they do not answer. Surely one reason why they neither appear nor audibly respond to our desolate cry, may be that if it is hard for us now to love supremely God whom we see not, it would be yet harder then were those who even in His eyes are lovely and desirable to woo us heavenward with unforgotten human tenderness. Any of us who have lost our nearest and dearest may realize how keen would be the temptation to love—alas! it may be to *go on* loving the creature more than the Creator.[14]

Aside from her more distinctively religious or devotional poetry, Christina wrote more than sixty poems touching on death; there is little variety of theme or mood in the group, exquisite as a number of them are.

In this sameness of tone and subject, she is again to be contrasted with Emily Dickinson. The American poet wrote an even larger proportion of her poems on death, and she, too, wrote of the separation and stillness of the grave and the hope of resurrection, and imagines herself as dead and yet sensible, talking with a neighbor in a tomb, or unexpectedly journeying with Death to the house "with roof scarce visible." But Emily thinks of many other things and concentrates her emotions in verses surprising us with their insight into familiar experiences; so we are led to feel not only the silence of the grave and its quiet aloofness, but also the intuition of the news of death in a country town; the coach and footman and *éclat* of the funeral; the bustle in a house the morning after death—that "solemnest of industries," and the heartache of the days that follow when we ponder unfinished "little workmanships in crayon or in wool." To Christina, death might be the gate into the courts of heaven; but to Emily, death confers dignity, the purple and the crown, on earth when simple you and I claim our rank to die. Emily

[14] *The Face of the Deep,* p. 44.

Dickinson may touch more deeply in more places; yet no poem of hers has the entire rightness of *Song* ("When I am dead"), *Shall I forget,* or the sonnet *Remember.*

The distinctive quality of Christina's lyrics on love and death may be further defined by reference to Emily Brontë. Emily wrote *Remembrance* in a mood comparable to that of Christina's *Remember* and *One Sea-Side Grave;* Emily more largely out of her imagination, Christina in at least one of the poems, out of experience. In *Remembrance* the bereaved lover dwells in memory on the dreary grave of one over whom the snows of fifteen Decembers have fallen; she asks forgiveness if she should forget; yet tells how sternly she has forced herself to check her burning wish to die and how she has not even dared to indulge in "memory's rapturous pain." In contrast with the tortured suffering there expressed, the tone of Christina's poems is controlled; passion has been transmuted to patient love. In *One Sea-Side Grave,* it is a tired reaper who reposes among his gathered corn, and the wistful, beautiful lines of *Remember* close with the quiet verses:

> Better by far you should forget and smile
> Than that you should remember and be sad.

It is evidence of Christina Rossetti's independence that she wrote so little at all related to medievalism. The painters and poets of her circle drew inspiration or subjects from the ballad or the lyric, the romance, chronicle, or saga of the Middle Ages. Apparently Christina never read the *Morte d'Arthur* which gave Gabriel and William Morris electric thrills, but learned romance from Keats and Scott. The background of *The Prince's Progress* and of *The Convent Threshold* is slightly suggestive of medieval days; there are two unimportant poems to Saint Elizabeth and one on Anne of Warwick, the betrothed of the Lancastrian Prince Edward; *Love from the North* was originally called *In the Days of the Sea Kings,* but in none of these is there any allusion to medieval life. We have called attention to the poems

showing ballad influence or imitation, but these again hardly indicate the past. Only *Maiden-Song* and *The Noble Sisters* are set definitely in the world of old tale. *Maiden-Song* is a gay narrative of three sisters, tall Meggan, dainty May, and fair Margaret. It is the youngest and fairest who after the manner of the fairy story is wooed and won by the lord king of all the land, a king bearing crown and scepter even when he goes ahunting.

To the small group of poems based on literary subjects belong a few early verses but no really significant poem of her maturity. *L.E.L.* was inspired by Mrs. Browning's poem on the death of the poetess Letitia Elizabeth Landon, but William Rossetti regards the poem as having personal application. Two sonnets are to poets—*On Keats* and *Cardinal Newman.* The sonnet to the latter is, however, not to the writer, but to the "weary champion of the Cross." It is in interesting contrast with Swinburne's sonnets of approximately the same date in which he commemorates Carlyle and Newman, his final word being:

> Go honoured hence, go home,
> Night's childless children; here your hour is done;
> Pass with the stars, and leave us with the sun.

Christina's reaction to the Cardinal's life is other:

> Long was thy sowing day, rest now and reap. . . .
> Thy best has done its best, thy worst its worst;
> Thy best its best, please God, thy best its best.

Gabriel and Christina Rossetti are both distinguished from the Victorian poets of the first and second rank by their relative lack of sociological interest. Christina engaged in practical charity, but rarely expressed in verse any fervor on political or social questions. A few poems do have social implications or are inspired by contemporary events. *A Royal Princess* tells the story of the king's daughter who is touched with compassion for her father's overworked and slaving subjects and is ready to perish to give them bread. Christina contributed the poem to an anthology, *Poems and an Offering to Lancashire. Printed and Published for the Relief of the Distressed in the Cotton Districts,*

*1863.* It is significant of the neo-Romantic element in mid-Victorian poetry that the Pre-Raphaelite poet takes the point of view not of a laborer but of the Princess "king-descended, decked with jewels, gilded," with an ivory chair to sit upon, and perfumed fountains and scented chambers for her delight. Christina contributed, too, a brief rhyme making a plea for kindness to animals to a sale for the benefit of the Anti-Vivisectionist Society. A rather long poem, *The Iniquity of the Fathers upon the Children,* is a narrative written with sympathy for the unacknowledged child of an unmarried great lady, and the religious poem, "Behold I stand at the Door and Knock," is an arraignment of the unthinking and ungenerous rich. As late in life as 1882, Christina published a humorous stanza, *Counterblast on a Penny Trumpet,* with reference to a newspaper censure of both Mr. Bright and Mr. Gladstone for diametrically opposed views. The best evidences, however, of her sympathetic reaction to contemporary events are, first: *In the Round Tower at Jhansi,* in which she tells of an incident of the Indian Mutiny with more vividness and far more economy than does Tennyson in *The Defence of Lucknow;* and second, the two poems on the German-French Campaign 1870-71. The first of these is too didactic to be the finest poetry, but the second, "Today for Me," makes us wish that the poet had written more often on impersonal subjects. It is an appeal for mercy on a fair country threatened with invasion of fields and subjection of spirit, an appeal which will keep its force as long as wars can happen.

## Chapter X

## POEMS AND TALES FOR CHILDREN AND SHORT STORIES

Between *The Prince's Progress* and the *Pageant* volumes of 1866 and 1881 respectively, the imaginative works which Christina published consisted of three books: a collection of short stories; *Sing-Song,* a nursery rhyme book; and *Speaking Likenesses,* a group of tales for children.

*Sing-Song,* published early in 1872, belongs to those years in Christina's life which were most nearly songless, the ten years or more following the date of the change in her relations with Charles Cayley. The rhymes composing the book were "dedicated without permission to the baby who suggested them," the son of Charles's brother, Professor Arthur Cayley. They were charmingly illustrated by Arthur Hughes, Christina and William expressing their approval as Mr. Hughes proceeded with his drawings. For her own and her brother's pleasure, Christina made some vignettes and marginal illustrations on her manuscript copy, a copy which later passed into her brother's possession.[1] She also later translated many of the poems into Italian under the title *Ninna-Nanna.*

The volume appeared just at the time of a considerable vogue for nonsense verses and children's poems and tales. W. S. Gilbert had published *Bab Ballads* in the magazine *Fun* in 1861 and had later in 1869 put them into book form with "More Bab Ballads"; he had formed his famous association with Sullivan in 1871 when their comic operas began delighting lovers of music

[1] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* p. 81, pp. 166-67.

and mirth. Edward Lear had set forth his *Book of Nonsense* as early as 1846; it was in its fifth edition in the 1860's, and in 1871 was followed by *Nonsense Songs and Stories,* and later by *More Nonsense, Pictures,* etc., and *Laughable Lyrics.* Lewis Carroll had charmed men and women as well as children with that eternally fresh and whimsically philosophical work, *Alice in Wonderland,* and its successors, *Through the Looking-Glass* and *The Hunting of the Snark,* these appearing in 1865, 1871, 1876. By this time Kate Greenaway's "toy-books" with their quaint pictures of old-fashioned boys and girls and flower gardens and tea-parties were pleasing not only the "little folk" for whom she primarily worked, but also the great art critic John Ruskin. She illustrated such classics as Mother Goose and the poem of the Pied Piper, and wrote many verses not unlike the *Sing-Song,* though usually more narrative.

Christina's *Sing-Song* and also her *Speaking Likenesses* were therefore altogether in the fashion, and *Sing-Song* at once gained the popularity which it has held ever since. She judged the volume as containing some of her best songs,[2] and her old friend, Ford Madox Brown, agreed that here were "about Christina's finest things."[3] The poetic quality of the rhymes is unquestionable and a few do rank among the poet's finest verses. The rhymes vary in their adaptation to the tastes and interest of children. The author, however, evidently intended some of them for women who are somewhat sentimentally affectionate towards very little children rather than for the children themselves. Others make the mistake of condescending to the child. Many achieve what was rare in the poetry written for children sixty years ago—the creation of genuine poetry out of the material of a child's experiences and fancies. A child likes to be *the* character of a poem whether he is in a familiar or a novel situation, so Christina gives welcome prominence to the little ego in more than one rhyme:

[2] *Ibid.,* p. 94.

[3] *Ibid.,* p. 207.

There's snow on the fields,
And cold in the cottage,
While I sit in the chimney nook
Supping hot pottage.

In more exalted mood is:

If I were a Queen
What would I do?
I'd make you a King.
And I'd wait on you.

If I were a King,
What would I do?
I'd make you Queen,
And I'd marry you.

A child likes, too, to recognize in the dignity of poetic clothing the familiar objects of his experience, and here in *Sing-Song* he can find verses about a wedding and a funeral, about daisies and daffodils, wrens and robins, the wind and the rainbow. But he likes, too, to view these things in a mood of pleasant wonder, to fancy strange inversions of natural laws or to imagine origins, analogies, far results. Christina gratifies this mood by rhymes without reason and also by poems of beauty and imagination.

There are many of these nonsense rhymes. Christina is fond of beginning such fancies with an *if* or a question, and she suggests such absurdities as Walter de la Mare and A. A. Milne invent when she writes:

If a pig wore a wig,
What could we say?
Treat him as a gentleman
And say "Good-day."
If his tail chanced to fail,
What could we do?
Send him to the tailoress
To get one new.

Her fishes with umbrellas and her lizards with parasols recall Alice's adventures through the looking glass. There is unmixed nonsense in some of the verses imitating the calls and various

cries of animals, and there are clever rhymes on the idiosyncrasies and paradoxical relations of words. Any child would laugh at being reminded that "a dumb-bell is no bell, though dumb," and that

> Cat's cradle does not hold the cat,
> Nor foxglove fit the fox.

The verses with morals are in the main humorous, sometimes the humor a little thin. They mainly suggest kindness to animals, and here again we meet with Christina's odd interest in frogs and mice, toads or moles, her sympathy expressing itself in whimsical rhymes.

Frequently her fancy turns to the stars, the moon, the wind, and she causes flowers and stars to change places, or wonders if the moon is tired when

> she looks so pale
> Within her misty veil.

Four of the prettiest of the songs are of the wind—best loved of all, this:

> Who has seen the wind?
> Neither I nor you:
> But when the leaves hang trembling
> The wind is passing thro'.
>
> Who has seen the wind?
> Neither you nor I:
> But when the trees bow down their heads
> The wind is passing by.

Children might miss in these verses the delightful surprises they find in Milne's rhymes or the suggestions of games and stories which Stevenson furnishes, yet they will nevertheless often be set to wondering or to dreaming. Her tendency to dwell on death appears in the strange inclusion of several verses on the death of babies. The themes of death and of pity for birds unite in a poem which every child who has conducted a bird funeral might appreciate:

Dead in the cold, a song-singing thrush,
Dead at the foot of a snowberry bush,—
Weave him a coffin of rush,
Dig him a grave where the soft mosses grow,
Raise him a tombstone of snow.

The merry little poem of a country holiday surprises us with its Horatian advice:

Don't wait for roses,
Losing today,
O Minnie, Mattie,
And wise little May.

It is remarkable that among the poems are none about fairies or dwarfs. Perhaps Christina held consciously or unconsciously the opinion of Alice Meynell as expressed in her *School of Poetry* that in modern times fairy poetry has become too conventionalized to possess freshness and sincerity. Yet the best of all Christina's poems for children is *Goblin Market,* more full of life, action, color, as it is, than any of the *Sing-Song* verses, but then the latter were after all "nursery rhymes" for very little children. They share with *Goblin Market* in a quality which all children's verses must have: obvious rhythm and strongly marked rhyme. Children like *Up-Hill,* too, with its question and answer and its pull on the imagination and feeling for mystery. The whole group of children's poems, however, is yet another instance of Christina Rossetti's finding escape from her uneventful, well-ordered existence not only into the dream world and into the veiled land beyond death but also into a child's world of wonder, of remarkable and pleasant happenings. When she said, "I am weighed down by the responsibility of all one does or does not do," she gave utterance not only to her own burden but to that of many other serious Victorians. No wonder she and they took holiday and played at being jester or child.

It was more than two years after *Sing-Song* that Christina published *Speaking Likenesses.* On May 4, 1874, she wrote Gabriel: "The story is really a Christmas trifle, would-be in the

Alice style with an eye to the market."[4] Arthur Hughes was again the illustrator. When she sent a copy to Gabriel, it was with a characteristically modest wish: "I hope Mr. Hughes will meet your approval, even if you skip my text."[5] The book is a quaint little volume bound in blue with gilt edges and with a cover design. It was dedicated to Mrs. Rossetti "in grateful remembrance of the stories with which she used to entertain her children." The plan of the book is that an aunt tells three stories to five little girls while they are sewing or one is finishing "some one drawing of the many she has begun." The stories are not very original or exciting; their didacticism is inappropriately heavy for the fancifulness of the tales. There are, however, some amusing fancies and some interestingly characteristic reflections of Christina. As she confessed, the fancies are reminiscent of her friend, Lewis Carroll's. In the first story, Flora wanders alone into a yew alley; the twenty-first yew was a very old one with a lamp on the top branch and in the trunk a door—

> . . . and "Ring also" printed in black letters on a brass plate; all as plain as possible in the lamplight. Flora stretched up her hand; and knocked and rang also. She was surprised to feel the knocker shake hands with her, and to see the bell handle twist around and open the door. "Dear me!" thought she, "why could not the door open itself instead of troubling the bell?" But she only said "thank you" and walked in.[6]

Within she found a handsomely furnished apartment where chairs moved arms and shifted shoulders to accommodate sitters, and footstools glided about and rose and sank to meet every length of leg. The tea trays which floated in with strawberries and cakes "floated out again empty, with considerable tact and good taste." An armchair pressed against her until she sat down. [Mr. Hughes pictures it with the top of the back carved as a face, the ends of the arms as hands, and the two front legs in the position of a bow—one forward, one back.] The unfriendly

[4] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* p. 44. [5] *Ibid.,* p. 47.
[6] *Speaking Likenesses,* London, 1874, p. 17.

children in this accommodating habitation were symbolically equipped with porcupine quills, or hooks, or facetted with angles. In this strange place was a glass house "pale amethyst-coloured and very trying to the complexion," and lamps like illuminated peaches, apples, apricots, plums, hung about with the profusion of a most fruitful orchard. Had the author, this exile from Italy of a second generation, inherited a longing that her lot had been cast in fairer, sunnier ground than in fog-bound England with its wall-protected fruit? Her mind was always turning to fruits whether of gardens, of dreamland, or of goblin markets. But to return to the story—at last, Flora, like Alice, woke up in the midst of dear familiar sights and sounds surrounded by "the pleasant coolness of approaching twilight."

In the second story, little wood creatures crowd around the heroine to make suggestions to her as to how to light an outdoor fire: squirrel, toad, frog, hedgehog, pigeon, and mole, the last helpfully rearranging the wood for her. The third story was a response to the girls' request that the aunt "be wonderful;" so it is a succession of marvels which disappointingly turn out to be no marvels but the machinery of a moral. The aunt's voice is, too, the voice of Christina when she directs her small hearers to turn all eyes on occupations, not on her, lest she should feel shy,[7] and when she paints such a twilight as this:

> And when, the forest shades left behind her, she went tripping along through the pale clear moonlight, in one moment the sky before her flashed with glittering gold, and flushed from horizon to zenith with a rosy glow; for the northern lights came out, and lit up each cloud as if it held lightning, and each hill as if it smouldered ready to burst into a volcano. Every oak-tree seemed turned to coral, and the road itself to a pavement of dusky carnelian.[8]

Christina's other work of fiction, *Commonplace and Other Short Stories,* is more ambitious than the child's tale, *Speaking Likenesses.* It was published in April, 1870, with a preface stat-

[7] *Speaking Likenesses,* p. 2.
[8] *Ibid.,* p. 94.

ing that the earliest written of the eight tales making up the volume belonged to 1852, the latest to the current year. William Rossetti has recorded facts about still another narrative written in about 1860, for he says that when Macmillan was pleased with *Up-Hill,* Gabriel asked that Christina should transmit to the publisher *Folio Q.* William explains:

*Folio Q* must have been a prose story which our sister wrote somewhere about the time here in question. It dealt with some supernatural matter—I think a man whose doom it was not to get reflected in a looking-glass (a sort of alternative form, so far, of *Peter Schlemil*). I preserve a faint but very favourable recollection of it, as perhaps the best tale Christina ever wrote in prose; but unfortunately it turned out to raise—or to *seem* as it were meant to raise—some dangerous moral question; and on having her attention directed to this, my sister, who had been all unconscious of any such matter, destroyed the MS. on the spot.[9]

Though Gabriel did not regard the stories of the 1870 volume as "dangerously exciting to the nervous system" or as on a par with his sister's poems, he was nevertheless interested and approving. Of the leading tale, *Commonplace,* he wrote to the publisher Ellis to whom the collection was to be offered that he thought it very good (in the Miss Austen vein rather), and sure, he should fancy, of a good success.[10] He described the same story to Miss Boyd, who was to furnish the woodcuts for the book, "as the most everyday affair possible."[11] Other readers have also cared most for the title story, though another bit of realism, *Vanna's Twins,* and the romantic *Lost Titian* might be regarded as equally well done. Of the other stories, one, *A Safe Investment,* is an allegory based on the text "Lay up for yourselves treasures in Heaven where moth does not corrupt nor thieves break through and steal:" two, *Nick* and *Hero,* are fairy

[9] *Family Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti,* Vol. II, pp. 162-63.

[10] *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti to His Publisher, F. S. Ellis,* editor, Oswald Doughty, London, 1928, pp. 14-15.

[11] *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Letters to Miss Alice Boyd, Fortnightly Review,* Vol. 123, p. 587.

stories; and two, *Pros and Cons* and *The Waves of this Troublesome World,* were mentioned by the author in her preface as having been written with special objects. She also says in the preface that not one of the stories was founded on fact. Her own later judgment of the stories was unfavorable. When in 1891 she sent a list of her books to an inquirer, she remarked on the title *Commonplace and Other Short Stories:* "Out of print and not worth printing."[12]

The first tale in the collection, *Commonplace,* occupies nearly half the volume; it is a long short story in eighteen chapters. Its title is indicative of the incidents in a story of three sisters somewhat, as Gabriel said, of the Miss Austen *genre.* The two younger Charlmont girls marry; the third and least admirable, for money; the second, after an early disappointment, for love. The oldest sister is bound by a promise to a foolish and somewhat unbalanced mother to await the return of her father to their seaside house at Brompton, though the father has been drowned at sea. After the manner of one of Miss Yonge's "pillars of a house," she has spent her life caring for her mother and sisters, and at thirty-two is a middle-aged spinster, who in evening dress wears lace over neck and arms. When her happily married sister said to her: "If only you too had a future," she looked out to the open sky and sea—"My dear," she answered, whilst her eyes gazed beyond clouds and waves, and rested on one narrow streak of sunlight which glowed at the horizon,—"My dear, my future seems further off than yours, but I certainly have a future and I can wait."[13] More comparable to Miss Austen or Mrs. Gaskell in art than such a pious conclusion are some of the characterizations, especially that of the chaperon, Miss Drum, a tall, pale, slim woman of unvarying voice and "an unflagging intention of being agreeable." From her the eldest Miss Charlmont acquired—

[12] Mackenzie Bell: *Christina Rossetti,* p. 278.

[13] *Commonplace and Other Short Stories,* London, 1870, p. 144.

A somewhat old-fashioned formality; from her, also high principles, and the instinct of self-denial. And because unselfishness, itself a negative, was Miss Drum's characteristic virtue, and because her sympathy, however prosy in expression, was sterling in quality . . . she was mainly describable by negatives.

The scene of *Commonplace* was Brompton-on-the-sea; that of *Vanna's Twins* and *The Waves of this Troublesome World* was Hastings, and the three stories give a picture of the pleasant East coast watering-places which Christina knew well, and knew not only as a resort of health seekers but also as the homes of fishermen and boatmen. *Vanna's Twins* is the story of the death in the snow of the children of a lovable Italian couple from Vascitamno, and *The Waves of this Troublesome World* teaches that though Dissenters may walk in the paths of righteousness, the more excellent way is back from meetinghouse to church, and through church to the altar and the blessed sacrament of the Eucharist. It is the only recorded utterance of Christina's that suggests any condescension to those who departed from Church of England creed and practice. On the other hand, *Pros and Cons* is an argument for free pews which is as Evangelical as it is Catholic.

*Nick* and *Hero* are moral stories in which fairies bestow the gift of metamorphosis. The first is a grotesque tale; the second, a pretty fairy story with poetic descriptions of fairy land and its princess, "butterfly-winged and colored like a roseleaf." There are, too, humorous bits: Uncle Treeh, the botanist who resembled a certain plant of the cactus tribe, once let his eyes dwell for a moment "on a human countenance with more admiration than on a vegetable."[14]

*The Lost Titian* was probably written in 1855, at about the time that Christina was most closely in touch with the artist circle in London. It was first published in New York in *The Crayon.* Titian gambles away his recently completed master-

[14] *Commonplace and Other Short Stories,* p. 202.

piece to an envious friend, Gianni, who resolves to keep his treasure hidden until after the master's death when he should reveal it as his own. But the time comes when Gianni, too, must sell all his possessions. He conceals the Titian under an inn-sign painting of a dragon put on with coarse and easily removable paints, but he dies before he regains the priceless picture, and so the Titian is lost.

## Chapter XI

## THE QUEST FOR THE INFINITE

The songs and other poems of Christina Rossetti which have been considered in this study have revealed her as an artist and as a woman of acute and deep feeling. They have suggested that she sought escape from a life of restricted activity—restricted by family responsibility, by her own ill health, by the spirit and conditions of her century—and that she found this escape in poetry, her imagination creating for herself a dreamland more lovely and tranquil than earth: a land of untroubled moonlit waters, perhaps a wood of vivid flowers and sunlit trees, or a child's world of topsy-turvydom and delightful things-as-they-should-be. Yet our knowledge of her life and character leads us to think that after all, her unfulfilled yearnings, her visions of ideal happiness and beauty were most nearly satisfied by her flight from the finite to the Infinite, in her quest for God.

She has told us the story of this quest in the devotional poems and prose works which she composed during a period of fifty years, for she was only twelve when she wrote a little hymn to "God who reigns on high," and she was nearly sixty-two when she published her commentary on the Beloved Disciple's vision of the Celestial City; even later she put into verse her assured belief that

> Heaven overarches earth and sea,
> Earth-sadness and sea-bitterness.
> Heaven overarches you and me.

Though as already noted, no sharp line may be drawn between her secular and her religious poems, she herself in each of her first two volumes arranged a group of lyrics under the heading "Devotional Poems." In 1893, she collected the poems inserted

in her prose works, divided them into seven sections, and published them in a volume called simply *Verses*. Finally in her complete poetical works, her brother has brought together the productions of her maturity as "Devotional Poems," and as "General Poems." He has preserved her own seven groups of devotional poems but has changed the order to make it more nearly conform to chronology. This latter is uncertain after 1866, the last year in which the pieces in her notebook were dated. Four hundred and fifty out of a total of nine hundred and ninety-six poems belong to the devotional section; they constitute the largest body of English religious verse since George Herbert's. It is interesting to note that of those four hundred and fifty poems, only eighty-seven belong to her life before 1866, the remaining three hundred and more having been composed after her hard-wrung renunciation of human love and marriage. The devotional prose works appeared between 1874 and 1892.

This personal revelation of her spiritual striving, her abasement and her exaltation, is one of those phases of her work which link her closely with her contemporaries. Christian virtues and practices which were all important to her were valued in like degree by other devout souls, and they, too, have written their spiritual autobiographies in diaries, biographies, novels, and poems. Hurrell Froude, the young leader of the Oxford Movement at its beginning, felt like Christina that he had a refractory, presumptuous nature which needed control; even more strenuously than she, he underwent fierce self-discipline and prayed that he might learn to be "humble and submissive and complying," that he might be glad of slights as from the Lord; and like her, he, a youth of singular purity, prostrated himself before the Almighty and hardly dared to beg forgiveness for his vileness, his forgetfulness of God, his pursuit of worldly delights, and his having "gone a-whoring after [his] own inventions."[1]

[1] L. I. Guiney, *Hurrell Froude: Memoranda and Comments,* London, 1904, p. 17.

When she was still in the nursery, Elizabeth Sewell felt herself open to religious impressions and would lie in her cot saying little prayers and hymns to herself.[2] Later she represented her heroine Amy Herbert as asserting, "If the Bible tells us so, it must be true," and as desiring never to depart from the order of the Prayer Book since it was put together by very good and wise men. Dean Church, the friend of John Keble, was strongly impressed with the latter's humility and his motto: "I refrain my soul and keep it low." The great hymn writers of the mid-Victorian period often chose the same subjects as Christina, and were possessed by a similar spirit. Many names come to mind: Isaac Williams; Cardinal Newman; H. F. Lyte; Mrs. C. F. Alexander; Bishop How; Christina's friend, Dr. R. F. Littledale; and greatest of all, his confrère J. Mason Neale, the gifted translator of medieval hymns. They wrote out of the depths, as Christina did, in supplication that unfeeling hearts be stirred and miserable sinners forgiven, or even more often they sang exultantly of the Church Triumphant and the glory of Christ.

"That supernatural world, of which this is an unworthy reflection but an essential apprenticeship, was made the basis of all imagining as of all learning."[3] The greatest leaders, Carlyle, Tennyson, Newman, Browning, Meredith, made varied approaches to God. To the modest, unobtrusive poet of the Anglican faith, God was not chiefly revealed in the cycles of history; the evolutionary process of lower to higher forms of life, of earth to spirit; the volitional response of the soul to its momentary activity as induced by love. She accepted the God and the doctrines of Christianity as revealed in the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer and as interpreted by the Church of England. Apparently she was never for a moment puzzled by the questioning spirit of Clough or the receding faith of Arnold. Gabriel Rossetti sang:

[3] A. H. Thorndike: *Literature in a Changing Age,* N. Y., 1920, p. 164.
[2] E. M. Sewell: *Autobiography,* pp. 2-3.

Still we say as we go,
"Strange to think by the way,
Whatever there is to know,
That shall we know one day."

His sister Christina was sure that even now no cloud obscured needed knowledge from us; the Apostles and prophets and the ordained priests of the Church could or had set before us as much of spiritual truth as our human intellects could grasp. She doubted her own worthiness of divine grace, her own strength to resist the world, but not for a moment did she doubt the existence and goodness of God and all the articles of the Christian creed.

Christina is unlike Wordsworth in his *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* and unlike some of the poets of the '90's and the present in never expressing emotion inspired by the beauty of Church architecture, heaven-reaching arch and vault and jeweled window, or by the beauty of the chants and symbolic actions of a ritualistic service. *After Communion* celebrates the effect upon the communicant of the sacred feast, not the ceremonial of the feast itself. She is, too, as a poet, quite unlike John Keble, though she writes a Christian Year in prose in the form of prayer and daily meditation and celebrates in verse the high and the minor festivals of the Church. She may share with him the love of peaceful English scenes, yet the criticism which Hurrell Froude made of his revered friend and tutor is far from applying to her, for Froude feared that Keble addressed himself too exclusively to plain, matter-of-fact, good sort of people and had not taken pains to interest the feelings of those who feel acutely, and indulge in a visionary existence which often makes them uncomfortable.[4] Now Christina was continually addressing herself to just this latter sensitive group and sharing with them her own visions and her own dreary or comforted moods.

What is derivative in Christina's religious poetry is that which

[4] L. I. Guiney, *Hurrell Froude, Memoranda and Comments*, p. 32.

has its source in the body of Christian teaching, mainly in the Bible. A German student, Ignatia Breme, in an investigation of the influence of the Bible upon Miss Rossetti's poetry, has collected a remarkable array of parallel passages from the two. Perhaps of nineteenth-century writers, only Ruskin would yield a similar harvest. Fräulein Breme has, for example, arranged *The Testimony* and the original phrases from Scripture in parallel columns, so that the poem appears a paraphrase of the first and second chapters of *Ecclesiastes*.[5] No such close correspondence is elsewhere found except in some two or three consecutive verses. It is interesting to identify at times a scriptural metaphor with a concealed image in Christina's poetry. In *Matthew* is written: "And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the tree"; this, in *Passing Away,* reappears in the World's boastful comparison of his ever-renewing life with man's brief existence:

> I shall clothe myself in Spring and bud in May:
> Thou, root-stricken, shalt not rebuild thy decay
> On my bosom for aye.

There are likenesses to Dante in phraseology and conception: like him, Christina writes of our mounting to God in "love's perpetual fire"[6] or "in old love's accustomed flame,"[7] and such a vision as this is reminiscent of those in the closing cantos of the *Paradiso:*

> All Seraphs clad in wings;
> All Cherubs and all Wheels which south and north
> Which east and west turn not in going forth;
> All many-semblanced ordered Spirits, as rings
> Of rainbow in unwonted fashionings.[8]

A striking instance of similarity in thought between Christina and her brother Gabriel occurs in the Dantesque poem *After this*

[5] I. Breme: *Christina Rossetti und der Einfluss der Bibel auf ihre Dichtung,* Münster, Westf., 1907, pp. 23-24.

[6] *Poetical Works,* p. 77.

[7] *Ibid.,* p. 222.

[8] *Ibid.,* p. 222.

*the Judgment.* In the great eighty-sixth sonnet of *The House of Life,* Gabriel pictures his "lost days" as after death rising to witness against him:

> Each one a murdered self, with low last breath.
> "I am thyself—what hast thou done to me?"
> "And I—and I—thyself," (lo! each one saith,)
> "And thou thyself to all eternity!"

Christina writes of the last judgment:

> When every sin I thought or spoke or did
> Shall meet me at the inexorable bar,
> And there be no man standing in the mid
> To plead for me.

There is marked sympathy, too, between Christina and some of the poets of the seventeenth century. Of these, she probably knew only Herbert well until the later years of her life, so the likenesses occurring hardly arise from imitation, conscious or unconscious. It has previously been noted that she early acknowledged some indebtedness to Herbert and that she sometimes uses the quaint diction or "fantastic" imagery of his school. This is true of her poems on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday ("Am I a stone and not a sheep?"), and of these lines echoing Herbert or Herrick:

> Life that was born today
> Must make no stay,
> But tend to end
> Like bloom of May.
>
> O Lord, confirm my root,
> Train up my shoot,
> To live and give
> A wholesome fruit.

Like Herbert, she prays that she may see God in lowly duties, and like him, she believes that "love is a present for a mighty king," and that love persistently welcomes souls who draw back "guiltie of dust and sinne."

At the present time the world is writing and reading a great

deal about mysticism, mysticism as a philohophy, as a religion, as the soul of poetry; especially in the past forty years, there has been an outpouring of mystic poetry. In regard to their attainment of the mystic vision, Christina Rossetti and George Herbert were closely akin. They were poets of the approaches to union with God, not poets of the full vision and absorption into the Divine Being. Mysticism[9] implies an active union with God, the perception of an eternal principle with which the soul of man desires alliance or identity, "the flight of the alone to the Alone." The Christian mystic like St. John believes that though God is in man, man without holiness may not see God, who is the originator and source of all good; and that man to attain such holiness, to win the true self and sink into God, must undergo purgation through self-renunciation and suffering, must lose his life in order to save it. The first essential of the traveler on the mystic way is the hunger and thirst for God, the restlessness of the soul until it find rest in God.

The life and the poems of Christina Rossetti reveal that she deeply felt and believed all this, yet her poems show, too, that always in the way of her attainment of the mystic's certainty that he is at one with the Infinite, obtruded the conflict in her nature between her love of the human and the perishable and the Divine and eternal.[10] She prays in agony of spirit that she may desire Christ above all things; she believes that He craves her life, her love, yet her heart is divided. She affirms that the wise send their hearts before them to heaven, the foolish nurse theirs "within the screen of this familiar world," and she fears that she is among the foolish:

[9] W. R. Inge: *Christian Mysticism,* New York, 1899, Ch. II; Baron Friedrich von Hügel: *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends,* London, 1908; Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism,* 1912—*passim.*

[10] See especially "I look for the Lord," *Poetical Works,* p. 151; *A Better Resurrection,* p. 191; *The Heart Knoweth its Own Bitterness,* p. 192.

Oh foolishest fond folly of a heart
Divided, neither here nor there at rest!
That hankers after Heaven but clings to earth;
That neither here nor there knows thorough mirth,
Half-choosing, wholly missing the good part.[11]

She dwells in poem after poem upon the greatness of Christ's love, especially as that love was shown in His suffering for man, His supreme sacrifice—and these are among the most beautiful and individual of her poems—yet, can she give Him the all that He requires? At the locked door of her heart

All night long that voice spake urgently,
"Open to Me."
Still harping in mine ears:
"Rise let me in."
Pleading with tears:
"Open to Me, that I may come to thee."
While the dew dropped, while the dark hours were cold:
"My Feet bleed, see My Face.
See My Hands bleed that bring thee grace,
My Heart doth bleed for thee,—
Open to Me."

So till the break of day:
Then died away
That voice, in silence as of sorrow;
Then footsteps echoing like a sigh
Passed me by,
Lingering footsteps slow to pass.
On the morrow
I saw upon the grass
Each footprint marked in blood, and on my door
The mark of blood for evermore.[12]

Francis Thompson's vision of the pursuit of the soul by the Hound of Heaven concludes with God's overtaking the wearied one and receiving him into His outstretched Hand of love. Did not Christina's intense humility, her strong sense of "holy fear,"

[11] *Poetical Works,* p. 80.
[12] *Ibid.,* p. 241.

stand in the way of her confidence that this could happen to her? She was too shy, too lowly, to say with Traherne that the world was his, that the King of Kings had

> His endless treasures
> Made all mine own, myself the end
> Of all His labours.

She says in *Seek and Find:* "All the good which resides in any creature . . . is an outcome of Himself, and is in a more or less degree a resemblance of Himself."[13] She was afraid that the good was not in her.

Perhaps, too, she was so practically honest, so bound by a certain degree of rationalism that she could not expect with Thompson to turn a stone and start the wing of a many-splendored angel, or to dare to say with still another mystic that a Christ with starry feet walked the road with her.[14] Though she always tried to desire and sometimes did desire the close companionship of God, she was seldom sure that she was walking with Him.

The happiest mystics have made no separation between the spiritual life before death and after. Wordsworth in this world might be laid asleep in body and become a living soul. Christina constantly differentiates the earthly and the heavenly and compares the limitations of the near-at-hand land with the satisfactions of the far away. Yet she values the fairness of the world—earth is good; the martyr of one of her poems[15] yearns over this earthly life:

> For sweet are sunshine and this upper air,
> And life and youth are sweet, and give us room
> For all most sweetest sweetnesses we taste.

Christina asks, too, if that future land will unite us and our loved ones as "we were together once."

There is expressed, however, the mystic's sense of union with God in the sonnet, *After Communion;* and in *Take Care of Him,*

[13] *Seek and Find,* p. 260.

[14] Evelyn Underhill: *The Uxbridge Road.*

[15] *Poetical Works: A Martyr,* p. 260.

the poet speaks with certainty of finding Christ in "each who needs and faints," in every brother man. At times, like Father Tabb, she attains something of the mystic's power to see into the life of things through her joy at the sight of exquisite rose, whitest lily, or even growing grass; through her pleasure in a flight of doves, a lark's song, the wind stirring the blackthorn. She shyly sings of a half-seen beauty, of a more than earthly love:

> But not alone the fairest flower:
> The merest grass
> Along the roadside where we pass,
> Lichen and moss and sturdy weed,
> Tell of His love.

She is like St. Francis, the friend of the birds and "brother of the Wolf" in her kindness to small creatures and her indignant protection of animals; and always she has the poet's—or is it the mystic's?—belief that "everything in being whatever it is, is symbolic of something more."

Bearing in mind her conflicts, her yearning, her humility, her thankfulness for the Sacrifice of Christ, we are not surprised to find that in her numerous religious lyrics, she is perhaps at her best, first, in the expression of the emotions inspired by the suffering of Christ, His patience with humanity, His exceeding love —the last resulting in happy hymns; and secondly, in the expression of her belief that never-failing watchfulness is imposed on all and that renunciation of earth is the key to heaven. Her sense of the conflict between good and evil voices itself in songs of martial note, and her utter faith in the existence of Paradise breaks forth in hymns of high triumph. Not less strong in feeling are the many poems on the theme of the restfulness of the grave, yet a grave which is but an inn on the pilgrim's passage to heaven.

The poems take the form of hymns, carols, litanies, at least one "burden" with Latin refrain, sonnets, and lyrics of varied forms. The Christmas poems are lovely things: *In the Bleak*

*Mid-Winter, Before the Paling of the Stars, Love Came Down at Christmas,* and *A Christmas Carol* "for my godchildren:"

The Shepherds had an Angel,
  The Wise Men had a star,
But what have I, a little child,
  To guide me home from far
Where glad stars sing together
  And singing angels are? . . .

The series of twenty-eight sonnets, *Later Life,* is repetitive of the idea of the unsatisfactoriness of this life and the uncertainty of the life beyond, yet there are noble sonnets in the group. The first in the series has something of sublimity in its expression of holy fear and of submission to an all-powerful God. The same effect of repetition is present in the sonnets: *Out of the Depths;* in the lyrics praising "Gifts and Graces"; and in the very large number of short poems on "Christ our All in All." There is a strikingly original poem on the prediction that in heaven, there shall be no more sea, that perhaps God's wrath was against the sea: Christina imagines the sea as lamenting "with unappeasable hankering wail of loss" and

Lifting its hands on high and passing by
  Out of the lovely light.[16]

Three fine feast-day poems are *St. Barnabas, Easter Even,* and *Ascension Day,* though *Advent* ("This Advent moon shines cold and clear.") with its alarum to never-remitting preparedness is the most beautiful of all the poems of church festivals.

Among the many poems expressing Christina's frequently recurring desire to escape from the loneliness of this life to heaven itself, *Marvel of Marvels* is one of the strongest; *A Hope Carol* one of the loveliest.

A night was near, a day was near
  Between a day and night
I heard sweet voices calling clear,
  Calling me:

[16] *Poetical Works,* p. 195.

I heard a whirr of wing on wing,
But could not see the sight:
I long to see the birds that sing,
I long to see.

Below the stars, beyond the moon,
Between the night and day,
I heard a rising falling tune
Calling me:
I long to see the pipes and strings
Whereon such minstrels play:
I long to see each face that sings,
I long to see.

Christina Rossetti wishes, however, the companionship of others in her ascent to God. She gained sympathetic readers through the beauty of her verse, but she felt, too, that she must consciously take part in an effort to encourage Christian knowledge, and so she wrote her prose commentaries partly for self-expression, but partly in order to share her discoveries with other people.

*Annus Domini* is a short, thick little book containing a prayer for each day of the year, founded on a text of Holy Scripture. In general there is throughout the series the exaltation of Christ: He is the Great King, Lord most High and Terrible, yet not less frequently He is invoked as the Saviour of the five wounds, of the anguish of Gethsemane, and the suffering of Calvary. The style of the petitions is that of the Book of Common Prayer and of the Bible with many of Christina's individual touches of thought and phraseology. Many prayers beseech protection against the world, the flesh, and the devil, and many, too, are for the salvation or forgiveness of all men, but especial intercession is made on different days "for all who in this world feel themselves neglected, or little loved, or forgotten"; "for all fallen women, or those persons marred in face or figure"; for "all persons of deficient or darkened intellect" that haunting terrors be kept far from them and their involuntary trespasses and errors

be forgiven. Difficult people of tyrannical spirit are not unmentioned, and how like Christina is the petition to the Heavenly Bridegroom that married persons may love Him in each other and each other in Him. There are, too, characteristic expressions of extreme abasement: "O Lord Jesus Christ in Whose Sight the stars are not pure, fill us, I beseech Thee, with awe and shame in Thy Presence; us sinners, us foul sinners full of wounds and bruises and putrifying sores." Elsewhere she asks for grace daily to walk in Jesus's "lovely Footsteps" and for assistance in "homely repentance." There are clarion calls to bow down before Him whose throne is a rainbow like unto an emerald, whose eyes are like a flame of fire; or to gird on one's armor to fight in the ranks of Him who goes forth conquering and to conquer. There is the might of the ancient prayers of an historic church in such a supplication as this:

> O Lord Jesus Christ, Who has the sharp Sword with two edges, give us holy fear, I pray Thee, that we may never in Thy Mercy forget Thy Justice. Let faith guide us, fear spur us, hope sustain us, love possess us: keep us from the cutting asunder of the wicked servant, and from the portion of unbelievers. Amen.[17]

There are at least two prayers also in *Called to be Saints* for this goading gift of holy fear.

The prefatory note to *Seek and Find* states that any textual elucidations are based on some translation as the author knew neither Hebrew nor Greek and that when she consulted a Harmony it was that of the late Reverend Isaac Williams. Similarly she explains in *Called to be Saints* that most authorities were cited at secondhand, for no graver slur could be attached to her book than would be a reputation for prevalent originality. She gives, too, as the source of the little biographies of saints in *Time Flies,* the Reverend S. Baring-Gould's *Lives of Saints.* At the end of her book on the Apocalypse she begs pardon if she has been overbold in attempting such a work. None of these books,

[17] *Annus Domini,* p. 333.

then, made any pretense of scholarly research. They are as the author describes them, devotional studies. She told her brother that *Seek and Find* was a simple work adapted to people who "knew less" than she. The four volumes testify to Christina's power of association; she frequently brings together an astounding number of analogies and parallel passages, which, like her religious poems, witness her intimacy with the Bible.

*Seek and Find* is a double series of short studies of the *Benedicite:* the first series, Creation; the second, Redemption. In each of the two parts a short chapter is about each "praise-giver" of the canticle. The whole is preceded by an outline in three columns: in the first is the verse from the *Benedicite* naming the praise-givers; in the second, a verse referring to God's creation of that particular creature of His; and in a third, a verse relating the praise-giver to Christ the Redeemer, or to some saying of His regarding it. For example:

| 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|
| The Praisegivers are O ye Angels of the Lord. | God's Creatures, Who maketh His angels spirits; His ministers a flaming fire. (Ps. Civ, 4.) | Christ's Saints. When He bringeth the First-begotten into the world, He saith, And let all the angels of God worship Him. (Heb. I, 6.) |

Christina suggests as the aim of the book, "the true end of all contemplation: to see Jesus."[18] The material of it is very largely the moral and religious interpretation of all the works of the Lord. The short life of Jonah's gourd typifies the brevity of human existence; the multitudinous unity of a plant sets forth Christ and His members; the starry host, Divine Omnipresence and Omniscience. The beauty of the book lies in the quality of the prose. When Christina apologized to Gabriel for writing a book "exclusive prose," she added, "Yet I flatter myself some of

[18] *Seek and Find,* p. 324.

it is that prose which I fancy our Italian half inclines us to indite."[19] Such a passage of satisfying cadence is that describing the beauty of snow, which "often floats down with hesitation as if it belonged to air rather than to earth; yet once resting on that ground it seemed loath to touch, it silently and surely accomplishes its allotted task." With a flash of remembrance of her one journey over the Alps into Italy, she remarks on "mountain-heights flushed with pure rosiness at the fall of day," and on mountain ranges where snow has its permanent habitation: "there it wraps itself in mist or overlooks the clouds, and thence not in silence but in thunder it rushes down upon the valleys."[20]

*Called to be Saints* is also marked with passages of quaint and beautiful or vividly descriptive writing, and it, too, is full of symbolism. Christina in the introduction promises to gather simples and to spell out their lessons as well as to seek meanings in the precious stones of the earth and of the deep; and so the clapperless harebell, trembling in every breeze yet unmoved from its serenity of silence,

> teaches us as by a painted parable the holiness of silence. . . . And when, as from their period and places of flowering is oftentimes the case, we mark these sky-coloured bells, in company with deeper sky-coloured butterflies of a yet nobler organization and more exquisite beauty, we may well thank God and take courage; remembering how any, even the lowliest person, whose conversation is in heaven, hath for intimates congenial flights of heavenly-minded angels.[21]

She pleads guilty to the possible charge that such an analogy may be a mere freak of fancy without basis of truth. Though she finds some usefulness in the cowslip, she decides that its most obvious use is to be beautiful, "and by its beauty to cheer man and woo the eyes of his heart towards God, Who made the fair creature and gave it for our solace."[22] Her morals, then, are

[19] *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti,* p. 60.
[20] *Seek and Find,* pp. 64-65.
[21] *Called to be Saints,* pp. 376-77.
[22] *Ibid.,* p. 240.

often the outcome of her happy discovery of some real or imagined kinship between man and the lovely things of the universe.

At the beginning of *Called to be Saints* the author placed a "Key" to her book which explains its plan and method. This "Key" itself begins with a tribute to the beauty of those who were the actual comrades of Christ, and is preceded by a foreword from Hooker in praise of the saints who are "the splendour and outward dignity of our religion." Those who are treated in the book are the nineteen saints commemorated in the Book of Common Prayer together with the Holy Innocents, St. Michael and All Angels, and All Saints. To each is assigned a collection of all the sacred texts about him, a biographical addition, a prayer, a memorial made up of appropriate passages from Scripture—chiefly the Psalms appointed to be read on the saint's day—and an account of a flower of the season. There are hymns for eleven of the festivals. In the case of the Twelve Apostles, there is furthermore a meditation on one of the twelve precious stones in the high priest's breastplate and in the foundations of the New Jerusalem. The symbol of each of the Four Evangelists is also the subject of a little essay, that on the ox of St. Matthew being amusing in its realistic, serious detail. Christina disclaimed all knowledge of petrology and botany; her nature portraits were only "loving studies from the outside." She did not hesitate to use legendary material and to suggest, for instance, the old traditional and mystical significance of precious stones. "If," she said, "some points of my descriptions are rather flights of antique fancy than lore of modern science, I hope that such points may rather recall a vanishing grace than mislead from the truth."[23] The writer is, indeed, a romantic poet distinguished by a vein of conscientious regard for fact. I judge the prayer for victory of St. Stephen's Day and the hymn for St. John's—"Jerusalem is built of gold"—as the finest pieces in the book.

[23] *Ibid.*, xvii-xviii.

*Letter and Spirit*, the shortest of the devotional studies, was dedicated to Mrs. Rossetti: "In thankfulness for her dear and honoured example." The subtitle of the book is *Notes on the Commandments*. The author begins by grouping the Ten Commandments under the headings of Christ's summary of the Decalogue: duty to God and duty to neighbor. She then calls attention to the harmony between a commandment concerning man's relation to God and a commandment, or commandments, regarding his relation to his fellowman. For example, the fifth commandment, "Honour thy parents," she parallels with the first, "Thou shalt have none other gods but Me." She enlarges upon the implications of each commandment, extending the meaning of each to include many duties not apparent on first reading, and illustrating the infringement or observance of the Hebrew and Christian code mainly from Bible story. She enters into frequent analysis of the causes or motives of sin and makes some nice distinctions, which recall such finely graduated categories of sin as occur in medieval theology. Here, too, is manifested Christina's feeling for words and their shades of meaning. Man's neglect of his duty to God arises, she thinks, from *disinclination;* his sin against his neighbor, from *distaste*. On the whole, her discussion is clear and practical, but her treatment of the doctrines of the Unity and Trinity of God show her intimacy with the theology on the subject, a theology not familiar to the layman.

There naturally appear in the book traits of thought and style characteristic of Christina. Again the love of Christ is exalted far above all other love, and again superior women are told that they must be subordinate to inferior husbands, for such is the will of God. Christina's recurring sympathy with Eve is expressed with some humor; that first and typical woman may be pictured

as indulging quite innocently sundry refined tastes and aspirations, a castle-building spirit (if so it may be called), a feminine boldness

and directness of aim combined with a no less feminine guessiness as to means. . . . By birthright gracious and accessible, she lends an ear to all petitions from all petitioners.

Another amusing passage has to do with Economy, "a shamefaced virtue," whom Christina sees as an unlovable woman,

who walks the world unabashed, and says her say complacently in company. . . . Her remarks turn on prices, and linger in the storeroom or the coal-cellar. She gossips about the extravagance of this dinner-giver, and the wastefulness of that household, frittering away her own and her neighbor's time, not to speak of her neighbor's patience. To save a halfpenny she will squander time recklessly, that priceless, irrecoverable treasure time.

Christina observed and measured the men and women of a homely world besides seeing the inhabitants of her dream world. No wonder she was at times "gently caustic of tongue."

Christina told Mr. Sharp that *Time Flies* gave her more pleasure in the contemplation than any other of her books. It is undoubtedly the most readable of the prose works and is the only one easily procurable at the present time, having been reprinted as recently as 1902. Its interest arises especially from its personal, conversational quality. Classes in elementary German are often asked to begin the day by narrating *etwas neues*. Christina in this "reading diary" of hers has *etwas neues* for every day in the year with additional bits for certain movable holy days. The daily readings may be an abridged saint's life, an apologue, a lesson drawn from some observation or commonplace experience of the author's, or a poem, for the book consists of poetry as well as prose. Much of it is spiced with humor and shrewd common sense. The starting points of some of the little essays are such homely incidents as the spider's web-building activities, the tapping of jackdaws and starlings on the window, the story of the frog whom Christina frightened and the frog who frightened her, or such whims and fancies as the imagining of the mummies in the British Museum all coming to life at once on the Last Day. More than one reading turns back to that cherished

Italian trip, though fairness compels her to concede how much more gorgeous the English wild scarlet poppies are than the Italian. She smiles over the miracles connected with St. Denis, St. Nicholas, St. Dunstan, and sympathizes with the wife of St. Hilary. When he severed the marriage tie, and his daughter, following his counsel, devoted herself to "the exclusive love of Christ," nothing is told of the deserted wife and mother—"Wherefore," Christina comments, "of her I am free to think as of one 'unknown and yet well known'; on earth of less dignified name than her husband and daughter, in Paradise it may well be of equal account."[24] There are plentiful bits of wisdom, often phrased as epigrams or aphorisms:

"Sloth runs no race."

Of the race all have to run in life—"A race it is, yet only to attain a goal, not to outstrip competitors."

"If we are not truthful one by one, we shall never add up as a truthful community."

"Tact resembles a lubricating oil;" its peculiar temptations are "to overstep the boundary of truth or at least to curve that straight line of limitation."

The flavor of her apologues is well illustrated by this for October 24 on the chameleon:

A worldly Christian resembles a chameleon which possesses two independent eyes addicted to looking in opposite directions.

One eye, let us say, peers frankly downwards fly seeking.

The twin eye peers skyward.

A chameleon used to enjoy the credit of living on air: surely an all but angelic reptile!

Such was the verdict of ignorance. The verdict of knowledge, nowadays, is that the chameleon simply lives on insects.

His downward eye contemplating earth hunts a walking fly. His upward eye scouring heaven presumably hunts a floating fly, but still a fly.

There remains no difference worth speaking of between his upward eye and his downward eye.[25]

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[24] *Time Flies,* p. 12.

[25] *Ibid.,* p. 204.

The poems include many of Christina's best short religious or nature lyrics. A few may be specified as altogether lovely or forceful: *Where Shall I Find a White Rose Blowing?, A Cold Wind Stirs the Black Thorn, Bury Hope out of Sight, No More Shall Sun and Planets Fly, Earth Has One Clear Call of Daily Bells, Love Came Down at Christmas,* and the poem for St. Bartholomew's Day.

The last composed of these prose works is the longest and weightiest, *The Face of the Deep,* "a devotional commentary on the Apocalypse." Each chapter corresponds to a chapter in St. John's *Revelation.* One or more verses are printed in heavy type, then follow comment, explanation of terms, citation of parallels and analogies, a prayer or a litany written in rhythmical prose or in verse, and one or more little lyrics. On the whole the quality of these latter does not measure up to Christina's previous standard, though there are interesting exceptions to this judgment, for here may be found such pretty lyrics as those beginning with the lines: "Life that was born today," "The twig sprouteth," "The sea laments," "Tempest and terror below."

A very large proportion of the book of over five hundred closely printed pages is devoted to the discovery and the interpretation of symbols, and Christina gives striking discussions of such Apocalyptic visions as that of the beasts, of the four horses, of the splendid City of God. She ventures

> to trust that throughout this Book of Revelations underlying or parallel with the primary meaning is often discernible a further signification which may be unfolded to us, even while the other continues occult.[26]

She, therefore, multiplies possible interpretations to such an extent that the reader tires. But she lays a solemn charge upon him:

> Each symbol suggests thought, however the veiled reality may elude discovery. Interpretation is the gift of some, thought of all. Lack of interpretation dispenses not from the duty of thought.

[26] *The Face of the Deep,* p. 195.

It is in this volume that Christina expresses a good many of the opinions already cited. She definitely refutes the belief in Purgatory[27] no matter how pleasing the doctrine may be to believers in an eternal hell; and here and in the prose works already discussed, she voices her fear that her day may be increasing knowledge at the expense of virtue. *Seek and Find* contains a statement of her acceptance of the theory of evolution and of her admiration for the achievements of applied science,[28] yet in *Annus Domini,* she prays that we be protected against false science and that we accept mysteries transcending reason. *The Face of the Deep* shows a stronger tendency on her part to fear the pursuit of truth—a tendency which her brother William regretted—and we find sprinkling its pages such statements as these: "It is wiser to remain ignorant than to know evil"; "It is nobler to believe than to understand"; "Ignorance is often a safeguard and a privilege."

Here, as in Christina's other works, there are, however, many pointed sayings and many passages of imaginative prose. One paragraph is a personal revelation of her recognition of the allurements of the world and her dread that yielding to such allurement might lead to eternal death. She is writing on the eighth verse of Chapter XIV—"Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city." The picture is as vivid as Bunyan's of Vanity Fair.

> Long ago Satan boasted to Christ's very Face that "all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them" were delivered unto him; nor did the Truth then and there give the lie to the father of lies. If, then, we may assume an ingredient of truth in the assertion, that element of truth supplies a clue to the fascination and domination of the world; a fascination which is deadly, a domination which is tyrannous. For Satan is the showman of her goodly show: he who can himself appear as an angel of light understands how to inflate her scale, tint her mists and bubbles with prismatic colours, hide her thorns under roses and her worms under silk. He can paint her face,

[27] *Ibid.,* p. 324.

[28] *Seek and Find,* pp. 25, 86, 89.

and tire her head, and set her on a wall and at a window, as the goal of a vain race, and the prize of a vain victory. David, superb in his kingliness, made to himself instruments of music; and so has she her men singers and women singers, her brazen wind instruments and her hollow drums. She spreads a feast: first her best, afterwards that which is worse; apples of Sodom to follow forbidden fruit. And as to her cup, "all nations" have not unwarned drunk of it: "Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder. Thine eyes shall behold strange women, and thine heart shall utter perverse things." If this be true of earth's vintage, how tenfold true of the world's![29]

It was a hundred years ago that there was born in London the child who passed from a merry, radiant childhood into a demure girlhood and a saddened womanhood. There was in her life much that hurt her, but true to the family motto, she had not bent under the strokes of pain nor lost courage when hopes were frustrated. The greatest of woman novelists of the Victorian age told more than once of the tragedy of a woman of aspiration as she observed it; George Eliot's heroines never attained their ambitions, but were forced to content themselves with resignation, with some form of self-immolation. Christina Rossetti had too much mental force, too much passion to be wholly resigned to the restricted life of a staid Victorian. If she had lived five centuries earlier, she might have found fulfillment in the prayers, the meditation, the humanitarian service of the cloister. If she had been born a half century later, her desire for achievement might have been satisfied in some one of the main fields of activity now open to women. But she had to live the uneventful life of quiet people in the center of a London residence district; and her dreams and her power found outlet in poetry. In imagination she left the dull London squares which were always home to her, and she created a world according to her desire. Every romantic poet does likewise. It may be a misty mid-region of

[29] *The Face of the Deep,* p. 357.

Weir, a land of Elenore or tract of Luthany, a Lake Isle of Innisfree. The world to which Christina Rossetti escaped had its own individual traits. After all, it was a world of many regions very different from one another. Often it is a garden tenanted by the furry little animals, the queer toads, and lizards, and spiders which are wholly safe in Christina's imagined thickets; the garden, though, is gay with flowers, and the visitor listens to the flutter of wings, the noiseless noise of falling leaves, or the singing of birds. Everywhere he is tempted by richly colored, luscious fruit. At other times, Christina escapes to the dreamy borderland between life and death, or she wonders what the grave is like. Still more often she visualizes Paradise, its beauty and its rapture, and longs to see its jeweled palaces. She once wrote that it was when our life is pared down and subdued and repressed to an intolerable level and our whole self revolts against our lot that we need a vision to make music in our hearts.

The music which her dreams created is original and unborrowed:

> . . . chants as of a lonely thrush's throat
> At latest eve,
> That does in each calm note
> Both joy and grieve;
> Notes few and strong and fine,
> Gilt with sweet day's decline,
> And sad with promise of a different sun.

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